A THRILLING PUBLICATION

MASKED RIDER WESTERN

ANC

15¢

SUMMER

RIDERS OF BUSHWHACK RANGE

A Wayne Morgan Novel

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

DUSTY DELIVERS

A Story of the Desert

By A. LESLIE

YOU CAN'T LOSE!

HAVE A PROFIT MAKING BUSINESS OF YOUR OWN

NATIONALLY ADVERTISED PRODUCTS

NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY

NO MONEY TO INVEST

FREE SAMPLE OUTFITS

FULL OR PART TIME

A LIFETIME FUTURE

Man or woman—young or old, YOU can earn a steady income in full or spare time as an independent Kendex dealer. Amazing and almost "impossible" earnings can become a reality for you. Herbert Armstrong of Tenn. earned $202 in 9 days. C. O. Watkins of Oregon sent 92 orders in one day. You have the same opportunity to duplicate these exceptional earnings. Over one million dollars will be earned in 1950 by Kendex dealers—why not let us establish you in your own business and get a share of these wonderful earnings?

KENDEX NYLONS REPLACED FREE . . .

if they run or snag within guarantee period up to three months! Impossible? It's true! No matter what the cause—hard use or deliberate abuse—whether it is fault of the hose or the wearer—Kendex nylons are replaced FREE if they run, snag or become unfit for wear within the guarantee period. How could any woman resist a positive guarantee of satisfaction when she can obtain it without paying any more than other standard advertised brands? Kendex nylons are NOT sold in stores, so you have no competition. Complete line includes everything from heavy 70 denier service weight to gossamer luxurious ultra sheer 15 denier 60 gauge. Proportioned sizes and lengths. Latest colors plus white.

LINGERIE - ROBES - HOUSECOATS - MEN'S HOSE

In addition to the sensational Kendex nylons, you will have a complete line of glamorous lingerie, beautiful robes and housecoats plus a complete line of Kentcraft mens' hosiery guaranteed for one full year. Any pair or pairs of men's hose that does not give satisfactory wear within one year of purchase will be replaced FREE!

NATIONALLY ADVERTISED

Kendex will spend over $350,000.00 in 1950 to tell millions of readers of the advantages in buying from you. Almost every issue of Good Housekeeping, Saturday Evening Post, McCall's, Women's Home Companion and Ladies' Home Journal carry our advertising in addition to many others. Kendex has advertised in Life, Look, Collier's, etc. Awarded Good Housekeeping Seal. Thousands of orders are shipped daily from coast to coast.

FOUR MONEY-MAKING LINES

- WOMEN'S NYLON HOSIERY
- GLAMOROUS LINGERIE
- HOUSECOATS—ROBES
- MEN'S HOSIERY

MAIL TODAY

NOTHING TO PAY

NO OBLIGATION

FREE NYLON STOCKING

EVERYTHING GIVEN FREE

Risk nothing! Mail coupon and we will send you, free and prepaid, complete money-making outfits including sample nylon stocking, samples of lingerie, robes, housecoats and men's hose fabrics and everything you need to immediately start making money. Complete outfits become your property even if you don't send any business. Simply write orders, we deliver and collect. Advance cash plus huge bonus. No money or experience needed. Mailing the coupon is all you need to start on the road to a 52-weeks-of-the-year high paying business of your own. You have everything to gain and nothing to lose.

KENDEX COMPANY, BABYLON, 743 N.Y.

KENDEX COMPANY
BABYLON 743, N.Y.

Date.....1950

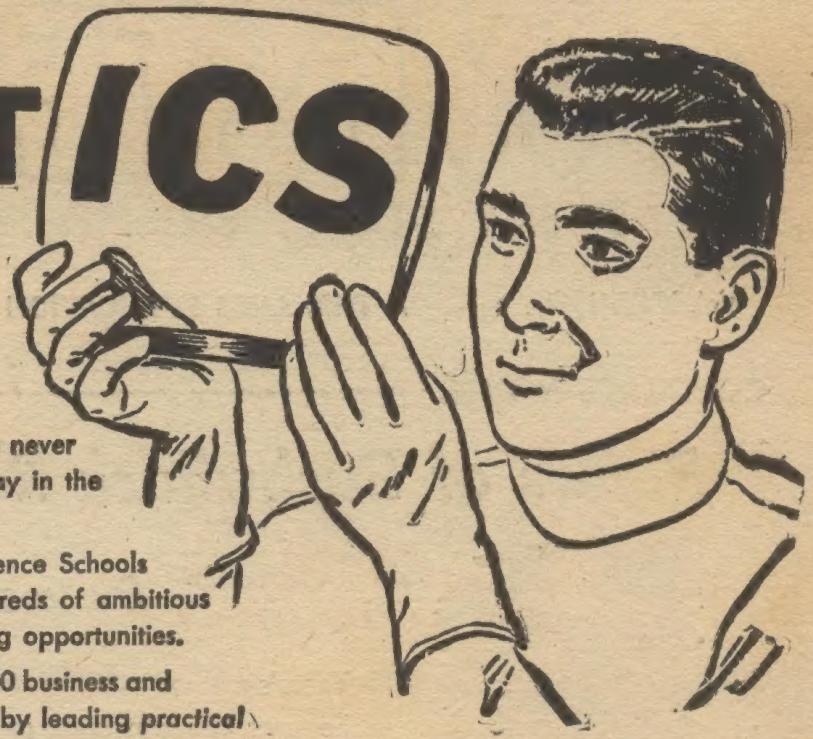
Send me, free and prepaid, everything I need to make money as a Kendex dealer, including sample stocking etc. There is nothing for me to pay now or later and I am under no obligation in accepting your money-making outfits.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....State.....

There's BIG MONEY in PLASTICS



- Your chances for success have never been greater than they are today in the field of plastics.
- The International Correspondence Schools Course in Plastics is fitting hundreds of ambitious men for these great and growing opportunities.
- All I.C.S. Courses (covering 400 business and technical subjects) are prepared by leading *practical* authorities, constantly revised to meet new developments. *Yet the cost of I.C.S. training is surprisingly low.*
- Join the men who will be tomorrow's leaders. Mail this coupon *today!*

Inspecting a plastic lens similar to type used to magnify television images.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

APPROVED under the G.I. BILL

BOX 3968-S, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

☐ **PLASTICS**

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
☐ Air Conditioning
☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemical Courses
☐ Chemical Engineering
☐ Chemistry, Analytical
☐ Chemistry, Industrial
☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
☐ Petroleum Refining
☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
☐ Architecture
☐ Architectural Drafting
☐ Bridge and Building Foremen
☐ Building Estimating
☐ Civil Engineering ☐ Coal Mining
☐ Contracting and Building
☐ Highway Engineering
☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
☐ Sanitary Engineering
☐ Structural Drafting
☐ Structural Engineering
☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
☐ Electronics
☐ Practical Telephony ☐ Radio, General
☐ Prac. FM and Television
☐ Radio Operating ☐ Radio Servicing
☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
☐ Electrical Drafting
☐ Electrical Engineering
☐ Electric Light and Power
☐ Lighting Technician
☐ Practical Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
☐ Diesel-Electric
☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
☐ Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr.
☐ Aircraft Drafting ☐ Flight Engineer
☐ Forging ☐ Foundry Work
☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
☐ Industrial Engineering
☐ Industrial Instrumentation
☐ Industrial Metallurgy
☐ Machine Shop
☐ Mechanical Drafting
☐ Mechanical Engineering
☐ Mold-Loft Work
☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
☐ Tool Designing ☐ Toolmaking
☐ Welding Engineering
☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
☐ Diesel Locomotive ☐ Locomotive Eng'r
☐ Locomotive Fireman
☐ Locomotive Machinist
☐ Railroad Section Foreman
☐ Stationary-Diesel Loco. Eng.
☐ Steam-Diesel Loco. Eng.

Stationary Eng'ring Courses
☐ Boilermaking
☐ Combustion Engineering
☐ Engine Running ☐ Marine Eng'r'g
☐ Power Plant Eng'r'g ☐ Steam Eng'r

Textile Courses
☐ Cotton Manufacturing
☐ Loom Fixing ☐ Rayon Weaving
☐ Textile Designing
☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Business and Academic Courses
☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
☐ Bookkeeping ☐ App. Psychology
☐ Business Administration
☐ Business Correspondence
☐ Cert. Pub. Acct. ☐ Bus. Law
☐ Commercial ☐ Commercial Art
☐ Cost Accounting ☐ Federal Tax
☐ First Year College
☐ Foremanship ☐ French
☐ Good English ☐ High School
☐ Higher Mathematics
☐ Industrial Supervision
☐ Motor Traffic ☐ Postal Civil Service
☐ Retail Bus. Manage't ☐ Retailing
☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
☐ Sign Lettering ☐ Illustration
☐ Spanish ☐ Stenography
☐ Traffic Management

Name_____ Age____ Home Address_____

City_____ State_____ Present Position_____

Employed by_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Length of Service in World War II_____

Enrollment under G.I. Bill approved for World War II Veterans. Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

MASKED RIDER WESTERN

EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

Vol. XXVIII, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION Summer, 1950

COMPLETE NOVEL

Riders of Bushwhack Range

By Joseph Chadwick

There's method in the madness of Wayne Morgan as he uses his own style of fighting to expose the bare bones of treason on the Maldonado when he's pitted against the scheming badmen of Brenoso! 11

SHORT STORIES

DUSTY DELIVERS ..... ***by A. Leslie*** **61**
A tornado sets the stage for desert tragedy in a sheep-cattle fracas

A DEPUTY'S LIFE ..... ***by Sam Brant*** **67**
An indecisive sheriff and a human snake can provide some rough going

HEADACHE HOMESTEAD ..... ***by Norman E. Bacon*** **74**
It's no fun for cowboy riders to find themselves behind a farm plow!

THE PURIFICATION OF TWO-BIT ..... ***by Jud Tally*** **81**
Set a thief to catch a thief—and, in this case, he catches himself

FEATURES

TRAIL TALK ..... ***by Foghorn Clancy*** **6**
A department for readers conducted by America's foremost rodeo expert

THE LOVELY JOSEFA ..... ***by Harry Van Demark*** **71**
The true romance of Kit Carson and his Chipita—an idyll of the West

MASKED RIDER WESTERN. Published quarterly by Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President.

Copyright, 1950, by Better Publications, Inc.

Subscription (12 issues), $1.80; single copies, 15 cents. Foreign postage extra. Entered as second-class matter January 20, 1948, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. In corresponding with this publication, please include your postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution be used it is a coincidence.

Printed in the U. S. A.

Our new refrigerator had a new fur coat in it!

SMART WOMAN! She didn't have to go without either a fur coat or a new refrigerator. The money she saved by getting a modern air-conditioned ICE refrigerator bought a magnificent fur coat.

You can do the same! You, too, can have a new refrigerator *and* that new fur coat—or new furniture—or electric washer.

And when you have your new ICE refrigerator you'll enjoy the finest in complete, scientific food protection—in a beautiful, roomy refrigerator you'll be proud to own.

See your local Ice Company today. You'll be surprised to learn how much you'll save by buying a modern air-conditioned ICE refrigerator.

WHY YOU SHOULD HAVE A MODERN ICE REFRIGERATOR

ECONOMICAL TO USE

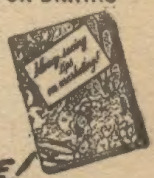
NO COVERED DISHES

LEFT-OVERS KEEP BETTER

NO REPAIR BILLS

VEGETABLES STAY GARDEN-FRESH

LOTS OF ICE FOR DRINKS



FREE!

"Money Saving Tips"—a valuable 24-page marketing guide. Mail a post card now to National Association of Ice Industries, Dept. TJ, 1706 L Street, N. W., Washington 6, D. C.

Genuine **ICE**

1850—ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF ICE PROGRESS—1950

A Department for Readers Conducted by

FOGHORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

GREETINGS, waddies! Once more it is time to saddle up for another trail ride and more trail talk, time to head down the back trails of yesteryear and ride amid the hardship, adventure and romance of the pioneers.

You know, if we just take the time to glance about us, we will realize that this land of ours is really a wonderful country. There are so many sights to be seen! Many of them that will remind us of the days of those brave souls, the pioneers who through their love of adventure and fair play, along with their quest for homes and fortune, gave us the great West we enjoy today. While the trails followed by the pioneers are obliterated today, with only a marker, or some old landmark to tell us of some great incident that took place, there are still a few old landmarks left that could tell many a great story if only they could talk.

Bridge Across the Pecos

There is an old landmark now passing out of the picture, a landmark that harks back to the early days of Texas, when Texas was wild and rough. It's the great bridge across the Pecos River on the main line of the Southern Pacific Railroad. I remember crossing this bridge years ago and it was really a sight to look out of the window of the coach and gaze down at that thin ribbonlike stream of the Pecos 321 feet below. At that time this was the highest railroad bridge in the world and the speed order to engineers was 12 miles per hour while passing over the bridge, which was a little more than 2100 feet long. That gave one plenty of time to get a good look at the great gorge through which the Pecos flows at this point.

The order for slow speed was not given however just so that passengers might have a better look at the river and the bridge, but because of the enormous height and the slimness of the bridge's steel legs or columns. It was considered a safer crossing at slow speed.

This historic bridge, built in 1891 is being razed, but it will not be destroyed altogether. The steel will be moved to Guatemala, that government having already purchased the steel.

The bridge will be missed on account of its being such a great sight to travelers over the "Sunset Route" of the Southern Pacific, on the way to and from California, and on account of its association with the early days of that section of the country.

The First Route

When this section of the railroad was completed in 1883, the railroad traffic was directed southward from the bridge site to a shorter, lower bridge, but the railroad's engineers considered this only a temporary solution to the problem of how to span the Pecos gorge.

Two tunnels were necessary to effect the crossing, both about fifteen hundred feet in length.

Including the bridge, this first route required fourteen iron spans totaling 2,700 feet in length, and required a detour of a little more than eleven miles as well as a dangerous curve of 10 degrees. Hence the great Pecos bridge was built and went into service.

A new bridge, having been built now some 500 feet downstream from the old bridge, has been in use for some years, while the old bridge, after carrying the heavy traffic of both world wars, is now being torn down. And so another landmark of the old West is passing, one which captured the nation's enthusiasm and became enshrined in history and legend.

A Feat on Horseback

Once a daring young lady horseback rider, a Miss Morehead of Del Rio, rode her horse across the bridge, this being a very hazardous feat, as the pony had to step from one crosstie to another, each being several inches apart, and there were no side rails to keep a horse from plunging over the side. To accomplish such a feat on horseback the horse must have had unlimited confidence in the rider. There are few horses looking down between the crossties and seeing the bottom of the gorge 300 feet below, that would not have become panic-stricken and unmanageable.

Only one suicide is recorded as having been made in a leap from the bridge, and this is quite singular as high bridges are supposed to be a special attraction to the morbid. In 1917 a young lady enroute from Del Rio to Sanderson walked out on the bridge with some other passengers who were viewing the gorge, and quickly stepped to the side and leaped into the canyon 321 feet below. With her belongings, which she had left in the coach, was found a note explaining that disappointment in a love affair had prompted her suicide.

No traffic accident was ever recorded as having taken place on the bridge, and naturally it was closely guarded especially during war time. During the First World War it was guarded by the 12th Regular Cavalry and during the later conflict by the 776th Military Police Battalion. During peace times the railroad hired its own guards and one of them, J. R. Hutchins, a former United States marshal, reputedly did not emerge from his home at the foot of the bridge for 22 years. Supplies, mail and newspapers were brought to him by "local" trains.

Judge Roy Bean's Inquest

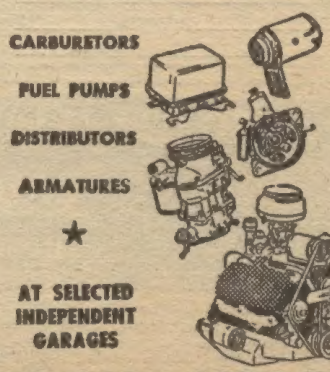
In the construction of the bridge seven lives were lost when ten men were thrown

[*Turn page*]

RECONDITIONED by authorized Reconditioner
Ford Ford
SAVE WITH Authorized
RECONDITIONED FORD ENGINE ACCESSORIES

• When you see this emblem on the reconditioned engine accessories and reconditioned engines you buy, you can be *sure* you've bought quality, performance, long life and real value.

For this *Authorized* reconditioner's emblem means that the engine and accessories are thoroughly reconditioned to Ford's famed hi-precision standards . . . only Genuine Ford Parts have been used . . . each unit rigidly tested by *Authorized* Ford reconditioners. That means you can buy with confidence, save time and money.



FORD Division of FORD MOTOR COMPANY

AUTO
BOOKS ON APPROVAL

SEND NO MONEY. Just mail the coupon for a complete set of 4 Big, Thick Auto Books. 30th Edition. Over 2700 Pages! Whether you are a mechanic or helper, expert or apprentice, auto owner or driver, take immediate advantage of this FREE EXAMINATION OFFER.

MAKE GOOD MONEY NOW
HOLD A PERMANENT JOB

America wants its automobiles kept in good repair. Men with "know how" are in demand, at big pay. These books will help you get and hold an important job, or give you a chance to go into business for yourself now or later. Any man who half tries to improve himself can learn auto servicing and repairing by this quick reference method. Use the JIFFY INDEX to find easily understood answer to any auto problem. These wonder books prepared by eleven of America's great automobile engineers. Many hundreds of valuable illustrations. Send the coupon TODAY.

A year's consulting privileges with our engineers now given with these books without extra charge. *Publishers Since 1898*

CAN YOU FIX IT?
These wonder books tell step by step HOW to make difficult repairs and adjustments, how to keep a car at maximum efficiency, including latest improvements in car design and operation. Engine troubles and how to correct them well covered.

4 BIG, THICK VOLUMES
Over 2700 pp., 2000 illustrations, wiring diagrams, etc. Beautiful modernistic, washable cloth binding.

AMERICAN TECHNICAL SOCIETY, Dept. AA-49
Drexel Ave. at 58th St., Chicago 37, Ill.
I would like to examine your 4-Volume Set of Auto Books. I will pay the delivery charges only, but if I choose I may return them express collect. If after 10 days' use I prefer to keep them, I will send you $2 and pay the balance at the rate of only $3 a month until $24.80 has been paid. Include consulting service as offered above.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

Please attach letter stating age, occupation, employer's name and address, and name and address of at least one business man as reference. Men in service, also please give home address.

CONFIDENTIAL LOAN SERVICE

Borrow $50 to $300 BY MAIL

Need money? No matter where you live . . . you can borrow BY MAIL, $50.00 to $300.00 this easy, quick, **confidential way. No endorsers needed.** Employed men & women of good character eligible. Solve your money problems quickly and in complete privacy with a loan made by mail. Employer, relatives and friends will not know you are applying for a loan. Convenient monthly payments. Rush coupon—giving occupation—for Application Blank sent FREE in plain envelope. No obligation. State Finance Co., 210 State Finance Bldg., Dept. G-82, Des Moines 8, Iowa

STATE FINANCE CO., Dept. G-82
210 State Finance Bldg., Des Moines 8, Iowa
Please rush FREE Application Blank.

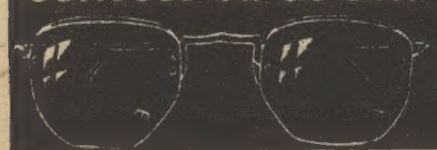
NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE .....

Occupation ..... Age .....

GLASSES on 30 DAY TRIAL!



SAVE UP TO $15.00

Test your eyes at home with our Home Eye Tester. *See far and near.* Perfect satisfaction guaranteed. Save money.

FREE Send name, address, age for 30 Day Trial Offer, Free Eye Tester, Latest Style Catalog and full information.

Agents Wanted

CLARK OPTICAL CO.
1148 West Chicago Ave. Dept. C-1008 Chicago 22, Ill.

into the canyon by the collapse of a portion of the structure they were working upon. Three were not killed but were very seriously injured. The verdict of the coroner was that the victims came to their death through an accident, and that coroner was Judge Roy Bean, who had ridden a mule over from Langtry in order to hold the inquest. He then proceeded to deliver a verdict of accidental death over the three injured men as well.

"These men aren't dead, Judge," protested some of the onlookers.

"That's all right," replied Judge Bean, "they are sure to die, and I'm not going to ride back up here just to hold another inquest."

Several pilots claim to have flown airplanes under the bridge, but Jimmy Doolittle is the only man whose performance of the feat is on record. In March, 1921, he flew under the structure in an open cockpit plane, tipping the wings of his ship in order to clear the upright spans.

The new bridge that has taken the place of the old one ranks as a great achievement in the field of engineering, but it will not keep the old bridge from being missed, and as passengers cross the new bridge in fast-speeding trains there will always for years to come be some mention made of the old bridge so closely entwined with the early history of the Pecos country.

A Grand Old Pioneer

Let's ride a little further along the Pecos and meet a grand old pioneer who is now 90 years old and still what might be called at that age, hale and hearty, keen of mind and possessing an unusual faculty for remembering incidents that happened many years ago. He is C. D. Bonney, of Roswell, New Mexico, once known as the Horse King of the Pecos Valley.

Arriving in New Mexico in 1881 from Kentucky, young Bonney made the little village of Roswell his home, and a little village it was, just a half dozen or so mud-topped adobe and dugout houses. Here he began riding the trails of adventure and romance in the Pecos cattle country. Being from Kentucky, a state noted for horses, and being himself a great horseman, he turned his attention mostly toward horses and established the first important horse ranch in the Pecos Valley.

During the 80's cattlemen were making fortunes driving cattle over the long and dusty trails to markets north and west, but they did it by what might be called mass production, by handling great numbers of cattle, as the price of cattle was very low. They would drive cattle from south Texas clear to Dodge City, Kansas, and then sell them at ten dollars to twelve dollars per head. Of course, any cattle in New Mexico or that section of the country ready for market could find market at Fort Sumner, where the government bought quite a supply of beef with which to feed the soldiers and the Indians on the reservations.

Indians rarely ever stole cattle. If they stole cattle at all it would be just a head or a few head to slaughter for their immediate needs, but they stole horses wherever they could, often stealing all the horses that a rancher owned and leaving him without any horses to work his cattle with.

One can then imagine the kind of nerve and determination that young Bonney possessed when he started a horse ranch in a section that was frequently visited by raiding Indians in quest of horses.

A Lot of Beans!

In addition to his horse activities, he entered business with Captain Joseph C. Lea, who was called the "Father of Roswell." Theirs was a merchandising business and all the merchandise brought into Roswell for Lea and Bonney was freighted by ox wagons and Mexican burro trains from the nearest railroad at Los Vegas. Horses were practically out of the question for the freight lines, on account of the Indians who would steal horses and sell them for almost anything of value. Two commodities shipped out of Roswell by Lea and Bonney were wool and beans. One shipment of beans shipped out by ox train amounted to 60,000 pounds.

Realizing that the future of the horse business in that section of the country depended upon doing away with the menace of raiding Indians, young Bonney entered upon the task of hunting down and helping to rid the country of these marauders. He began work as an Indian scout for the government soldiers stationed at Fort Stanton about 80 miles west of Roswell. When not

(Continued on page 90)

TO PEOPLE Who Want To Write

but can't get started

Do you have that constant urge to write but fear that a beginner hasn't a chance? Then listen to what the former editor of Liberty said on this subject:

"There is more room for newcomers in the writing field today than ever before. Some of the greatest of writing men and women have passed from the scene in recent years. Who will take their places? Who will be the new Robert W. Chambers, Edgar Wallace, Rudyard Kipling? Fame, riches and the happiness of achievement await the new men and women of power."

Sells 95 Stories and Novelettes

"The introduction you gave me to your editor friend, resulting in my present assignment to do a complete novel for him monthly, is doubly appreciated, especially since I finished my N.I.A. training some time ago, and, consequently, have no call on your service. Here is concrete evidence that interest in your students continues indefinitely. To date now, I have sold 95 stories and novelettes to 20 national magazines."—Darrel Jordan, P.O. Box 279, Friendship, N. Y.

Writing Aptitude Test — FREE!

THE Newspaper Institute of America offers a free Writing Aptitude Test. Its object is to discover new recruits for the army of men and women who add to their income by fiction and article writing. The Writing Aptitude Test is a simple but expert analysis of your latent ability, your powers of imagination, logic, etc. Not all applicants pass this test. Those who do are qualified to take the famous N. I. A. course based on the *practical* training given by big metropolitan dailies.

This is the New York Copy Desk Method which teaches you to write by writing. You develop your *individual* style instead of trying to copy that of others. Although you work at home, on your own time, you are constantly guided by experienced writers. You "cover" actual assignments such as metropolitan reporters get. It is really fascinating work. Each week you see new progress. In a matter of months you can acquire the coveted "professional" touch. Then you're ready for market with greatly improved chances of making sales.

VETERANS:- THIS COURSE APPROVED FOR VETERANS' TRAINING

Mail the Coupon Now

But the first step is to take the FREE Writing Aptitude Test. It requires but a few minutes and costs nothing. So mail the coupon now. Make the first move towards the most enjoyable and profitable occupation—writing for publication! Newspaper Institute of America, One Park Avenue, New York 16, N. Y. (Founded 1925)

Free

Newspaper Institute of America
One Park Ave., New York 16, N. Y.

Send me, without cost or obligation, your Writing Aptitude Test and further information about writing for profit.

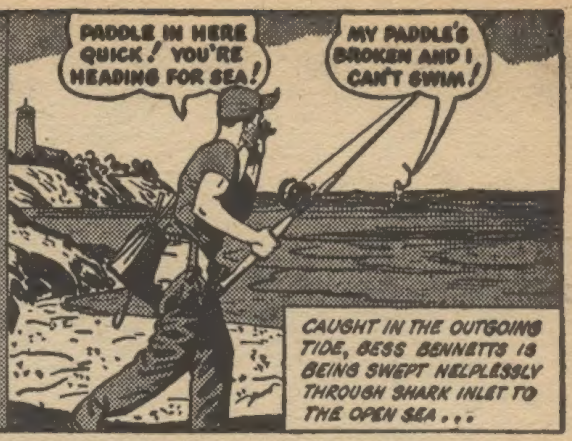
Mr. }
Mrs. } .....
Miss }

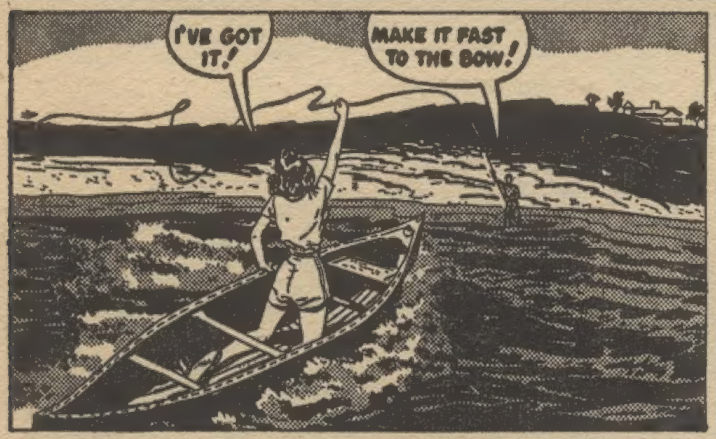
Address.....

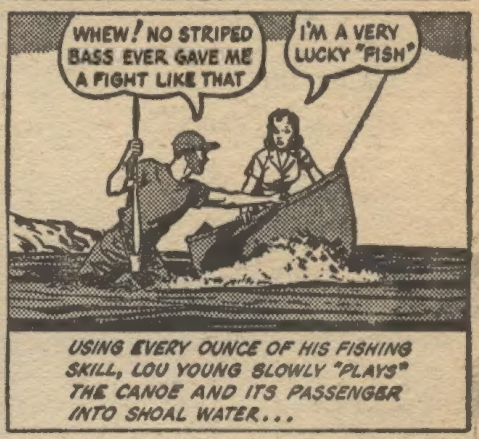
( ) Check here if you are eligible under the G.I. Bill of Rights.
(All correspondence confidential. No salesman will call on you.) 94-H-660

Copyright 1949, Newspaper Institute of America.

IT WAS MORE THAN "FISHERMAN'S LUCK" WHEN . . .


PADDLE IN HERE QUICK! YOU'RE HEADING FOR SEA!
MY PADDLE'S BROKEN AND I CAN'T SWIM!
CAUGHT IN THE OUTGOING TIDE, BESS BENNETTS IS BEING SWEPT HELPLESSLY THROUGH SHARK INLET TO THE OPEN SEA . . .




WHEW! NO STRIPED BASS EVER GAVE ME A FIGHT LIKE THAT
I'M A VERY LUCKY "FISH"
USING EVERY OUNCE OF HIS FISHING SKILL, LOU YOUNG SLOWLY "PLAYS" THE CANOE AND ITS PASSENGER INTO SHOAL WATER . . .

FOR THE QUICKEST, EASIEST SHAVES YOU EVER HAD WITH A LOW-PRICE BLADE, TRY THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN, FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, AND PROTECT YOU FROM IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES.
ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT 10-BLADE PACKAGE
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢
NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

RIDERS of BUSHWHACK RANGE

There's method in Wayne Morgan's madness when his own style of fighting exposes bare bones of treason on the Maldonado!

CHAPTER I

Fear Rides the Brenoso Hills

TOWARD sundown a rider broke from the scrub timber and angled down the east slope of the Brenosos. He rode relaxed, even when the going was most treacherous, in the careless fashion of a man born to the saddle. It was obvious that he trusted his hammer-headed roan not to make a misstep.

His clothes marked him as a cowhand, his casual air suggested a drifter. But

A MASKED RIDER NOVEL BY

JOSEPH CHADWICK

any chance observer seeing the direction from which this rider came might have wondered, "Why does he travel where there are no trails? What is this hombre up to?"

For the Brenoso Hills are back country.

The word *brenoso* is Spanish and means, literally, craggy and brambled. To the natives of the surrounding country, to the vaqueros and pastores, the name has a broader meaning—malpais, the badlands. These natives shun the Brenoso barrens, for honest men, they will tell you, have no business in such country.

This rider on the roan horse?

Quien sabe? Wayne Morgan always traveled uncertain trails, for danger was his destiny. But now, coming from the Brenosos, where his camp was located, he was seeking a small thing. He was in quest of a bit of salt.

Strange?

Not at all.

An unsalted meal was apt to be unappetizing, and a saltless diet, especially in a hot climate, did not wholly renew a man's strength. Two days ago, before entering the Brenoso malpais, Morgan and his trailmate, the Yaqui Blue Hawk, had stocked up on provisions. Somehow they had forgotten salt, and so today Wayne Morgan had said, "I'll ride to the nearest ranch or sheep camp and beg, borrow or buy some."

Now, coming from the hills, he looked down upon a rocky flatland that showed him neither cattle or sheep. The only sign of humans was a vehicle of some sort coming slowly along the road that wound through the boulders, slabs, spires, columns and all sorts of erratic formations, which were like crude, over-sized tombstones in a vast graveyard. Morgan reached the base of the slope, turned his roan in the direction of the oncoming rig.

He saw now that it was a native wagon of two solid wooden wheels and drawn by a span of oxen, called a carreta. The oxen plodded along without urging from the Mexican. He was, in fact, riding the clumsy cart. His huge straw sombrero shielded him from the sun. His head was bowed, his chin rested upon his chest, and it was clear to Morgan, now riding close, that the fellow was taking a late siesta.

"Hola, amigo!"

The Mexican gave a start, snapped his head up, turned a pudgy face toward Morgan. He seemed about to scream. Wayne Morgan had seen fear on men's faces before; this fellow showed stark terror.

He cried, *"Madre de Dios!"*

And for a plump man, he moved astonishingly fast. He leapt from the cart, on the side away from Morgan and was running the instant his sandaled feet touched the ground. He ran like a frightened mule deer, darting in among the jumble of rocks, looking back over his shoulder once to see if he was being pursued. He tripped and fell, but bounded up and fled again. Shortly he was lost to Morgan's sight behind a screen of boulders and jutting rocks.

Morgan could have given chase and ridden the Mexican down had there been reason to catch him, but without reason there was little sense in risking a broken leg for the roan in among those rocks. For a minute, Wayne Morgan was gripped by surprise. He'd reined in at the start of the peon's flight. Now he rode over to the carreta and looked in. He found it empty. The fellow wasn't hauling provisions. Morgan would obtain no salt here.

He laughed aloud, finding humor in the hombre's senseless flight, and wondered what caused the Mexican to have such a guilty conscience that he needed to run from a stranger met along a lonely road. He left the cart, rode south, in the direction the Mexican and his clumsy rig had come, still amused.

MORGAN traveled another half mile before the rock field ended, then he saw how the land changed to range country—grass flats and sagebrush hills. Cattle grazed upon the flatland, and a band of sheep was being herded down from a gentle slope by two pastores and a sheep dog. The sheepherders were mounted, and they had with them a mule under pack. Morgan left the road, swung toward the outfit at a lope.

in the Perilous Pursuit of Brenoso Badmen!

He was midway between the road and the sheep when the pastores saw him. He heard them exchange yells, frightened yells, and saw them abandon the woolies and hightail in wild flight back over the hills. The pack-mule followed them, but the dog stayed with the sheep and, as Morgan drew close, it bared ugly fangs and began a vicious snarling. A big, tawny beast of nondescript breed, it seemed about to launch itself in one great leap at Morgan's throat.

To make matters worse, the sheep now spooked the roan. Accustomed to cattle,

WAYNE MORGAN

the horse apparently didn't like woolie smell. It began to buck wildly, and Morgan had to keep a wary eye on the dog, ready to draw his gun if it attacked, and at the same time fight to get his mount back under control.

Luckily, a lamb broke away from the band and distracted the dog. While the well-trained animal darted after the lamb, to turn it back into the band, Morgan steadied the roan. He also swung hastily away from the sheep, and now he was no longer amused. After all, frightening people out of their wits was not Wayne Morgan's idea of sport. But why were these people scared of him.

He couldn't understand it.

Wayne Morgan was in appearance not at all a man from whom other men would flee as from *El Diablo*. He was, in fact, a ruggedly handsome man. He wore the ordinary clothes of a cowhand—a flat-crowned gray Stetson, a dark gray shirt, faded levis, half-boots. He did wear guns, Colt .45s in his holsters and a Winchester .30-30 in his saddleboot, but here in this country every man went armed. The man of the carreta had worn a six-shooter and the two pastores who had abandoned their sheep and fled over the hill had rifles on their saddles. The sight of an armed rider shouldn't have frightened those three.

Why, then?

Morgan was tempted to ride after the two sheepherders and ask them some questions, if he could catch them. He decided against that immediately. He would just frighten them more by taking their trail, and frightened men would usually fight if cornered. Morgan didn't want them shooting at him, and he didn't want to shoot at them. He would leave them alone so that they could return to their sheep. Returning to the road, he again headed south.

An hour later, the sun now half down in the west, Morgan topped a ridge and looked down upon a valley range. He saw perhaps a thousand head of cattle scattered through the small valley, and half a mile away, nestling in a bow of the low hills, sighted the ranch headquarters.

He rode down, headed directly toward the headquarters, which consisted merely of a small ranchhouse, a barn, and a pole corral. The buildings were of log, so Morgan guessed that—since here in New Mexico the natives of Mexican heritage favored adobe—this ranch was owned by an Anglo-American. He hoped that was an accurate guess, for people of his own race would be less likely to be frightened by him.

Morgan rode slowly, peering about. He saw no one there, but a wispy strand of wood smoke curled from the cabin's stone chimney. There were four horses in the corral. The barn door stood open.

The headquarters suggested a one-man outfit, but everything was neat and tidy. A huge old cottonwood shaded the cabin. There were other trees fringing a small creek to the right of the headquarters. Within hailing distance, Morgan called out, "Hello, the cabin!"

There was no reply.

No one appeared.

Morgan reined in, frowning. Everything that had happened to him since he left his camp in the Brenosos served to bewilder him. The silence of this place puzzled him as much as the terrified flight of the carreta driver and the two sheepherders. The smoke from the chimney told him that someone had been about but a little while ago, no doubt cooking supper. A saddle was on the corral fence, and Morgan was almost certain that if the rancher had seen him and fled, it had been afoot. He'd seen no rider on the valley range.

After a moment of looking about, Morgan rode closer to the ranch buildings. He called out again, louder this time, "Hello, the cabin!"

He got a reply now.

A harsh voice said, "All right, hombre! Turn around and take a load of scatter-shot in your guts!"

CHAPTER II

Salt Saves a Soul

WAYNE MORGAN was a rider of the danger trails. He had risked his life oftener than a hundred ordinary men. Yet he had not grown hardened to risk; he still was not immune to honest fear. He felt genuine alarm now, for he recognized in the voice of this man he had yet to see not mere bluster but grim determination. No idle threat, this. The man would gun him down when he faced about. There was bitterness in that voice, and despair. And bitter, desperate men, Morgan well knew, will kill on the slightest provocation.

This man must be given no provocation.

Morgan realized, even as alarm knifed through him, that the rancher was no back-shooter. The man would shoot an enemy only when facing him.

Morgan thought, "I daren't turn around!"

He lifted his hands shoulder high in unmistakable token of surrender and remained steady in the saddle, gazing straight ahead at the cabin. It was normal under such circumstances to look around for a glimpse of the danger, but Morgan steeled himself against such a move. He said mildly, "Listen, friend—"

"Friend!" the man behind him said savagely. "Don't give me that!"

"You might hear me out."

"Say your piece, dammit. It's the last thing you'll ever say. Say it—then turn, grabbing!"

"I'm a stranger in these parts," Morgan said, still keeping his voice pitched low. "You never saw me before. You've got no reason to want to gun me down. Even if you had, mister, what chance would I have? If you've got a shotgun, you could cut me in two before I got my gun out and faced you."

"You're a stranger, all right. And a hired gunman!"

"You couldn't be more wrong, mister."

"A drifter with his holsters tied down—a gunfighter!"

Morgan moistened his lips. He tried to loosen the knots that tightened his nerves. He grasped at hope. The way out was to keep this man with the shotgun talking. Morgan said, "Call me what you like, but don't say my guns are for hire. If there's a bounty on your hide, I didn't know it. If I'd known it and wanted to collect it, I wouldn't have ridden up and let you get the drop on me."

The rancher was silent.

Morgan waited.

After a long moment, the rancher said, in an altered tone, "Maybe you're a tricky son. Maybe you figured that you could catch me off guard by riding in friendly-like." There was a trace of uncertainty in his voice now. "If you weren't hired to kill me, why are you here? You've got no business with me."

"I have a good reason for coming here."

"Yeah? Well, it better be good."

Morgan heaved a sigh of relief. He still wasn't safe, but for the moment he'd sidestepped the danger of death. He decided to crowd his luck a little farther, and said, "I'll tell you my reason to your

face, mister. I like to look at a man when I talk to him. I'm turning my horse, but I'm keeping my hands away from my guns. Ease up on that shotgun trigger."

"I'm keeping you covered, stranger."

"Sure," said Morgan.

He neck-reined the roan about, and saw a slightly built man of about his own age, about thirty, standing in the doorway of the barn. The rancher had his scatter-gun leveled, both barrels cocked, and he looked as taut as the string of a bow in the hands of Morgan's partner, Blue Hawk, and as dangerous.

He was bareheaded, and his yellow hair was tousled. His face was bristly with a stubble of beard; it had a haggard look. His eyes were a lighter blue than Morgan's; they were bloodshot. He looked like a man just over a bad drunk, but Morgan was sure that fear and worry and lack of sleep, not drink, had marked this man. He looked like a man in the grip of desperation.

"All right," he growled. "Now talk."

"Sure. My name's Morgan—Wayne Morgan."

"Never heard of you. But that's not saying you're not one of the crowd that's out to get me—and steal my range!"

Morgan pretended not to hear that. He went on, "I just came into this country, and I'm in camp with my partner over in the badlands. We're just drifting." He managed a grin. "Just seeing what's over the next hill, you might say. We have plenty of grub, except for salt. Chuck's not much good without salt. So I figured I'd ride to the nearest ranch, and beg, borrow or buy some. That, friend, is my reason for coming here—to get a few ounces of salt."

He held his breath.

It seemed a pretty weak reason, even to himself.

If this rancher was as close to the end of his rope mentally as he looked, he might call Morgan a liar and blast away with that shotgun!

IT WAS a bad moment for Morgan. He hadn't a chance of getting a gun out and blasting in time to keep the rancher from pulling the scatter-gun's triggers. He would try, if the man's trigger finger began to squeeze, but that's all he could do—try. But suddenly the rancher threw back his head and guffawed. He lowered the shotgun so that its twin muzzles pointed at the ground.

"That's the first time I've laughed in a month, Morgan!" he said, once he'd had his laugh. "Salt! That's just crazy enough to be true!"

Morgan managed to chuckle.

He felt a vast relief. The rancher had been close to madness, but now his reason was restored. That hearty burst of laughter had been a cure for him. He'd regained his mental balance. Morgan swung from the saddle, stepped forward, held out his hand.

"Looks like you need a friend," he said.

"You're right, Morgan," the rancher said, and, shifting his gun to his left hand, he grasped Morgan's hand. "Walt Owens is my name. I was loco enough to fill you with scatter-shot, until you said what brought you here. But a man gets loco when he knows a bunch of tough gun-hands are out to get him. Salt? Sure, I can spare you some. I've got a five-pound sack in my cabin."

Owens eased down the hammers of his shotgun.

He seemed to regard Morgan without suspicion now, and on his part, Wayne Morgan found Walt Owens a likable sort. The tall, blue-eyed drifter, whose past was his own secret, was a keen judge of men. Too, he knew Owens's kind well. Nester-ranchers. Two-bit ranchers, or greasy-sack ranchers. No matter what they were called, they were usually decent and trustworthy men. Now, following Owens to the cabin, Morgan wondered just what it was the rancher feared—just what it was that he was up against.

It might be something that would interest—the Masked Rider!

Inside the cabin, which was so tidy that Morgan almost suspected a woman's presence, Owens opened his cupboard and took out his bag of salt. He poured some of the salt into an empty tin-can, then placed the sack, half-full, on the table. He gave Morgan a curious glance but did not ask a question. In cattle country, drifters were never questioned. To pry would be committing a breach of range etiquette.

Morgan was rolling a cigarette. He too was curious, but he didn't want to pry. After passing his makings to Owens, he

lighted up and then said, "On my way here I met up with some Mexicans. They high-tailed it as though I had the smallpox. Queer."

"Not so queer."

"No?"

"The Mexicans in these parts have reason to fear strangers."

Morgan's eyes glinted. "That right?"

Owens nodded, returned the tobacco sack and papers to his visitor, and lighted his cigarette. "It's a long story, friend,"

Louise Dodds, with her rifle leveled over the sill, saw the black-clad man on the knoll (CHAP. VI)

he said. "You, being a stranger, might not be interested."

"I'm listening."

Owens nodded. The bleak look had returned to his face. He sighed heavily, and said, "Find a good range, and you find trouble. I came here from Texas where the range was too crowded and leased range from the family that owns all this country under an old Spanish land grant. It's called the Maldonado Rancho, and the family is still known as the Maldonado family—though now old Don Miguel O'Reilly is head of it. About two hundred other small ranchers have leased range from Don Miguel. They're in for trouble, too. So are the Mexicans who have lived on Maldonado Rancho for generations. But I've been picked as an example. You see, Morgan, an outfit called the Southwest Land Development Company has put up a claim for Maldonado Rancho and—"

"And," Morgan broke in, "this outfit

calls you a squatter. Right?"

"That's it," Owens said thickly. "And if those crooks can make it stick and drive me off my leased range, they'll go after every man now on Maldonado Rancho—even old Don Miguel, himself—for illegal squatting. And I've got to face it. I'm licked!"

CHAPTER III

Trouble on the Double

MORGAN remained silent, but the gleam in his eyes showed how interested he was. As the alter ego of the Masked Rider, the West's Robin Hood outlaw, he saw that here was a chance to do some good. The Masked Rider had dedicated his life to helping the unfortunates, the underdogs, the persecuted, and if what Walt Owens told Wayne Morgan—and the drifter had no reason to doubt the rancher—was true, then there was cause for the Masked Rider to ride this range.

Owens spoke in a flat tone with an undercurrent of bitterness. He had all he owned tied up in his Double O ranch, he explained. He had been doing well, building for the future, but then Clayton Farnum, head of the Southwest Land Development Company, had singled him out as a squatter, suing him in the Territorial Court in an attempt to dispossess him.

Farnum was shrewd, ruthless. He re-

tained lawyers, he employed gunmen. His suit against Walt Owens had been a test case, and now, the Territorial Supreme Court having handed down a decision against Owens, Farnum had the way clear to move against the other nester-ranchers. But he was not bothering to use legal methods against the so-called squatters of Mexican blood.

They were poor, ignorant of the law and the courts, and so could be handled in a different manner. From the time of his arrival in the country, Clayton Farnum—so Walt Owens told Wayne Morgan—had been persecuting the Mexicans. Farnum's hired toughs were brutal in their treatment of the peon farmers and sheepherders, and the persecution had been partially successful. Many of the Mexicans had fled from Maldonado Rancho.

AS OWENS paused in his bitter recital, Morgan said, "So that's why those Mexicans ran from me. They thought I was one of this Farnum's gunmen."

"That's it, Morgan."

"How is it that you're so in fear of your life?"

"Farnum's put his gunslicks on me," Owens said. "Three of them came here two days ago and ordered me to clear out. I drove them off at gunpoint. Last night one of them tried to ambush me. You see, Morgan, I've refused to quit my ranch. I've got the right to appeal to the United States Supreme Court, and my lawyer, over in Santa Fe, is getting ready to file the appeal.

"Farnum doesn't like that. It'll tie things up for him, delay his plans. After the trial in Territorial Court last week, Farnum offered to pay me a thousand dollars for what he called the improvements I'd made on my ranch if I'd relinquish my right to appeal. I turned him down."

"So now he's trying to scare you off, eh?"

"Or kill me," Owens said.

"Murder?" Morgan said. "This Farnum hombre must be smart enough to know he can't get away with it."

"How could it be proved on him?" Owens replied. "One of his toughs could kill me and leave the country. Farnum wouldn't do the job himself. I'd be dead, the killer would disappear, and Clayton Farnum wouldn't even let his conscience bother him. I tell you—" The rancher broke off, stared at Morgan. "What's wrong?" he demanded.

Wayne Morgan had stiffened. He was listening intently.

He said, "Riders coming," and turned quickly toward the door.

THE Farnum crowd came in force. There were seven horsemen approaching the Double O Ranch headquarters, and it was apparent that Clayton Farnum hoped that the odds would cow Walt Owens into not resisting.

But the rancher, muttering an oath, waited for them with his shotgun in the crook of his arm.

Morgan waited beside Owens.

He saw the folly of fighting against such odds, and he intended to keep his new friend from getting himself killed.

The seven riders came into the ranch yard, halted in a line abreast and facing Owens and Morgan. A rather distinguished looking man mounted upon a fine sorrel horse was in the middle of the line. He was well dressed, in city fashion, and he cut an imposing figure. Morgan glanced at Walt Owens, and knew by the hate in the rancher's eyes that this man was Clayton Farnum.

Morgan's alert gaze swept the others, and he recognized them as men who hired out for any sort of job that involved a minimum of work. They were men who had gone wrong at some turn of life's trail or were by nature wild and lawless. They drew fighting wages, without a doubt, and would earn their pay when the occasion arose.

All but one of the seven were strangers to Morgan. He had encountered the man who kept closest to Farnum several years ago in Texas. A burly, coarse man, his name was Jake Lestrade. He was always vain, always arrogant, sometimes downright vicious.

He was young, in his late twenties, Lestrade recognized Morgan, and a grin curled his lips.

"Hired yourself a gunfighter, eh, Owens?"

Owens's voice was flat.

"No," he said.

"Don't lie to me," Lestrade retorted, his grin fading. "I know this hombre. He's a

tough hand, a fast man with a gun. He has a reputation for throwing in with squatters and such-like." He cut Wayne Morgan a hostile look. "A meddler," he added.

Morgan swallowed the insult.

The situation was dynamite. Lestrade was always ready for trouble, and Owens again had that wild, desperate look that Morgan had seen upon arriving here. Guns would start blasting at the slightest provocation. And Morgan was determined to keep blood from being spilled. Clayton Farnum, too, saw how dangerous both Lestrade and Owens were, while at the same time he appeared to regard Wayne Morgan as an uncertain element.

Farnum might want to be rid of Walt Owens, but he didn't want shooting while he was present and likely to stop a slug. He gestured at Lestrade, said curtly, "I'll handle this, Jake."

He kneed his mount forward, reined in within ten feet of Owens, and said, civilly enough, "Owens, I want no trouble with you. There's nothing personal in this. It's a matter of business, nothing more. I have a writ of ejectment for you." He took the document from his inside pocket, held it out. "It's a court order, Owens."

"Clear out with it, you smooth-talking tinhorn!"

"Owens, I order you to vacate!"

"Farnum, I order you to get off my land," said Owens, and there were two ominous metallic clicks as he thumbed back the hammers of his shotgun. "I'm giving you one minute to turn tail and run!"

Farnum showed a brief alarm, but then he looked angry. Either he thought that the rancher was bluffing, or he was a very brave—or brash—man. Wayne Morgan, studying Farnum intently, decided that the man was both misjudging Owens and that he had plenty of courage. A man of about forty-five, Farnum looked physically and mentally formidable.

But he was running a grave risk now. Owens was so desperate that the slightest provocation would snap his reason, and Farnum's gunhands would be no protection if Owens went berserk. They might cut the rancher down in the end, but by then their boss would be dead.

Morgan himself had no stake in this game, and he'd taken no part in it, but he

BLUE HAWK

was well aware that if guns started blasting, he too would be a target—just because he was there with Owens. He knew that he had to do something quickly.

He said, "Let me see that paper."

He stepped forward, holding out his hand, as though to take the writ from Farnum. Then he whirled on Owens. He was none too soon. Owens' wild look told him that he was going to open fire. Morgan grabbed the double barrel of the shotgun, shoved it downward. One barrel roared, then the other. But the deadly scatter-shot went into the ground. Owens cursed, yelled like a crazy man. "You're one of them!" he snarled. "You lying son!"

Quicker than the eye could see, he reversed the now empty shotgun and swung it like a club at Morgan's head. Morgan was prepared for the attack, however, and he dropped low, in under the clubbing weapon, and hit Owens' knees with his body. The crazed rancher spilled over backwards. He landed hard, sprawled on his back. He levered himself up on his elbows, glared wildly at Morgan. His yellow hair hung down over his forehead. His breathing rasped, and there was foam on his lips. He uttered

a strangling cry and lurched to his feet, rushed at Morgan. Braced and ready, Morgan struck out. The blow caught Owens on the chin. It was a powerful blow, and Owens collapsed. He lay sprawled face down, not moving.

One of the riders came up behind Morgan, and growled, "Let me at him! I'll fix him—good!"

Morgan whirled.

By some gun-wizardry, his .45's were in his hands as he faced the rider. It was the brutish Jake Lestrade, and he was about to fire a slug into the unconscious Walt Owens.

CHAPTER IV

Walt Owens Finds Hope

THE odds that had been seven to two were now, through Morgan's own actions, seven to one. But the drifter had made his play and he wasn't backing down. He couldn't stand by and see a helpless man murdered in cold blood. He ignored the other riders, kept Jake Lestrade covered, and said flatly, "Put up your gun, Jake. Put it up, or I'll blast you apart from it!"

Lestrade looked at Morgan's guns, cocked and ready.

He looked at Morgan's eyes, chill and deadly.

Clayton Farnum said, "Holster your gun, Jake. He means what he says. Besides, we came here to dispossess Owens—not kill him. You and the boys move Owens' belongings out of the cabin and barn, then set fire to those shacks. I want to talk to this man."

Lestrade obeyed willingly enough, glad to get out of the situation without losing face. He shoved his gun back into its holster, then dismounted. He barked an order at the other hardcases, and they got down from their horses and followed him to the log ranchhouse.

Morgan put away his guns, knelt beside Walt Owens.

He regretted that he had had to hit the rancher, yet knew that he had saved Owens' life—and perhaps his own—by knocking him out. Owens was still unconscious, and Morgan hoped that he wouldn't come to until after Farnum and his riders were gone. Rising, he faced Farnum. The man was studying him intently.

"Friend, you're a fast man with both your fists and your guns."

"I get by, Farnum."

Farnum smiled faintly. "You've the advantage of me. You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"It's Morgan. Wayne Morgan."

"And. . . ?"

"And what?" said Morgan.

"I'd like to know a little more about you," Farnum told him. "You look like a cowhand, Morgan, but I don't think you're working for any of the ranchers in these parts. If you're looking for a job, I might take you on. I could use a man like you."

Morgan shook his head. "I'm just drifting," he explained. "But if I was looking for a job, it wouldn't be with a crew like yours. I don't like the kind of men you've already got in your outfit."

Farnum chuckled, said, "To tell you the truth, I don't like that kind, myself. But they serve my purpose. I need riders who aren't afraid of a little trouble." He took out and lighted a cigar, still studying Morgan. Then he asked bluntly, "I suppose Owens painted me pretty black to you."

"That's right."

"There are two sides to every argument, friend."

"That's right too," Morgan said. "Let's hear your side."

Farnum nodded, puffed on his cigar. "I bought nearly half a million acres of this country from the heirs of General Gonzales," he explained. "My investment runs into many thousands of dollars. When I came here to take over my land, I found squatters holding the best parts of it. I was forced to protect my investment, Morgan, or be ruined."

"Owens told me this range was owned by the Maldonado family."

"Originally it was."

"Then how come you bought your part of it from this General Gonzales's heirs?"

Farnum shrugged. "It's easily explained. General Gonzales received a grant of land from Armijo, the last Mexican governor of New Mexico, for services to the Mexican government. Gonzales defeated an expedition of Texans that invaded and attempted to seize the territory in 1845, and Governor Armijo re-

warded him with a grant of land. Gonzales never took over his land. He was killed in '46 when fighting against Kearny's Army of the West. But the title of the land was held by the General's heirs, and I dealt with them."

"But it was really Maldonado land?"

"The Maldonado family held it under a Spanish land grant dated 1695, but the Mexican grant voided that of the Spanish Crown."

"And the Territorial Court upheld your claim?"

"That's right, Morgan."

"Then Owens hasn't a leg to stand on—legally?"

"You catch on a lot quicker than he does," Farnum said, smiling. He had a likable personality. He seemed friendly, and appeared to regret that he had been forced to put pressure on Walt Owens. "That's how it is, friend. I'm a businessman, not the blackguard Owens thinks me. I intend to establish a great ranch here, and I hope in time to develop the entire country. I plan to bring in settlers and see the land grow and prosper. But first I've got to prove my claim to my part of Maldonado Rancho beyond all dispute."

"It sounds reasonable," Morgan admitted. "Your side of the argument."

"I'm a reasonable man," Farnum replied, with another smile. "And I think you are, too. I'd like to have you working for me. Don't decide on the spur of the moment. Think it over. You'll find me at my office in Santa Rosita."

Morgan nodded.

He had no intention of even considering hiring on with this man. Farnum's side of the dispute might be reasonable, but Walt Owens' side couldn't be wholly wrong. And Wayne Morgan, as the alter ego of the Masked Rider, was always on the side of the underdog. He would think it over, all right, but only to see if Walt Owens and the other so-called squatters were being dealt with fairly by Clayton Farnum and the courts!

FARNUM'S men carried Walt Owens' belongings from the cabin and barn, dumped them on the ground, then put the buildings to the torch. As the flames leapt high, Morgan went to the corral, opened the gate, and drove out the four Double O horses. He took Owens' saddle from the corral fence and carried it to a safe place. The buildings burned like tinder.

The entire Farnum crowd was now mounted, ready to depart, and Farnum called out, "I hope to see you in Santa Rosita, Morgan."

Jake Lestrade sneered, and said, "Boss, wherever you see this hombre, you see trouble. Take my advice and give him orders to clear out of the country."

Farnum merely smiled.

He turned his horse, started out across the range, his men following him. Lestrade gave Morgan a black scowl as he rode out. They were already a mile away when Walt Owens regained consciousness. Owens got to his feet, stood swaying, stared at his flame-swept buildings. Morgan stepped over, lay a friendly hand on the man's shoulder.

"Take it easy, Walt," Morgan said gently. "This is just a setback for you, not the end of things. You've still got your life, and you wouldn't have that if I hadn't jumped you."

"I went out my head, Morgan."

"Any man would have, in your place," Morgan told him. "From now on, you'll have to keep a grip on yourself. You can't whip that crowd by yourself. Play it smart from now on. Let Farnum and his hardcases think you've accepted defeat. Make a show of rounding up your cattle to move out. You savvy?"

Owens turned and looked at him. "I was wrong about you when I accused you of being in with that crowd," he said. "You saved my life, and I'm obliged to you. But I can't see what you're getting at now."

"I've met Farnum's kind before."

"So what?"

"He's a gambler. He's gambling a few thousand dollars to gain a fortune in land. And from what I know of his kind, I'd say that the cards he holds aren't as good as he wants everybody to think."

"They're better than the cards I hold."

"Maybe, maybe not," Morgan said. "Look; he won his suit against you in court, but he doesn't want you to appeal. He's afraid to risk more litigation. He came here to scare you out of the country or kill you. If he'd found you alone, you'd either be dead now or badly gunwhipped. It looks to me as though he's not got much

time—as though he's got to move fast. If he thinks he's driven you out, he'll jump the other nester-ranchers. What's got to be done is to find out what cards Farnum holds."

"How?" Owens demanded.

"Leave that to me," Morgan told him.

"Why should you mix in this, Morgan?"

"No reason why, I guess. But I'm takign a hand in the game." Morgan had a sudden thought. He asked, "How is it that the Maldonado family lets Farnum get away with this? They should be fighting him in court, it sems to me."

Owens frowned. "They can't prove up their claim to their own range," he said. "The Gonzales title has Don Miguel hogtied. You see, Morgan, the original land grant paper from the Spanish Crown has been lost. Farnum knows that. He knows Don Miguel hasn't a chance of winning a law suit. We can't expect any help from the Maldonado family."

Owens had felt a little hope while Morgan was talking of taking a hand in the game, but now his despair returned. "It's no use," he said. "There's nothing we can do. And you being a stranger—"

"I don't stay a stranger long," Wayne Morgan said, grinning.

HE CROSSED to where the Farnum toughs had piled Owens' belongings, dug into the untidy heap, found the bag of salt. He carried it to his roan horse, stowed it in his saddle pocket. He mounted, saw that Walt Owens was staring bleakly at the burning Double O headquarters. The rancher was a picture of despair. He needed some reassurance, Morgan saw; he needed to be given a shot of hope. The man felt beaten. He couldn't believe that a drifter could help him. Morgan thought he knew a way to buck him up. He kneed the roan over to Owens.

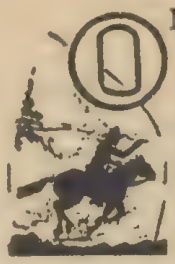
"You ever hear of the Masked Rider, Walt?"

Owens gave a start, looked up sharply. "Sure. Back in Texas." His face changed. Hope kindled again in his eyes. "What about him?"

"He happens to have a camp over in the Brenoso Hills," Morgan said. "I'm going to tell him what's going on here, and maybe I can persuade him to throw in with us. *Quien sabe?*"

CHAPTER V

A Purse for Power



ON THE trail back to his camp in the *malpais* Morgan wasted no time. Nearing the hideout through the gathering darkness, he uttered a weird cry that resembled the call of a mountain lion. It was a signal, and almost at once an answering cry came—from Blue Hawk.

The Indian appeared from a brush thicket, silent as a shadow, and said low-voiced, in good but rather choppy English, "I worried, Senor. You were gone long. You had trouble getting the salt?"

"A little, amigo," said Morgan, dismounting.

They walked together, Morgan leading the roan, and the trail twisted through the densest kind of brush country. The camp was well hidden. A small fire burned, the frugal sort of campfire an Indian builds. Three horses were picketed nearby; the Masked Rider's fine black stallion, Blue Hawk's gray, and a pinto pack horse. Gear and provisions were neatly stacked.

In the flickering glow of the fire, Blue Hawk was revealed as a superb specimen of his race. The Yaqui's copper-hued face was noble, highly intelligent. His dark hair was worn long and tied back by a crimson bandeau that encircled his head. He dressed in white cotton shirt and breeches, and there was a crimson sash around his waist. His only weapon at the moment was a sheath-knife, carried in the sash. But Blue Hawk was adept with revolver, rifle, and primitive bow and arrow. He had been Wayne Morgan's companion for many years, and only Blue Hawk knew that Morgan was in reality the legendary figure known throughout the West as the Masked Rider. There was devotion in the Yaqui's eyes as he looked at Morgan, who handed him the bag of salt from the roan's saddle pocket and said, "I'll saddle Midnight and change my duds while you're rustling up chuck, amigo."

Blue Hawk's look sharpened. "And then, Senor?"

"The Masked Rider rides tonight," Morgan told him.

Neither Lestrade nor any of his men heard the twang of Blue Hawk's bow (CHAP. XII)

He off-saddled and rubbed down the roan, then took the handsome black stallion off its picket-line. Midnight was a far better animal than the roan; it was the fastest horse Morgan had ever ridden, and, as the Masked Rider, he had trained it to ride the danger trails without shying from gunshots or hostile men. It was a big, sleek-coated animal—a beautiful mount. Morgan talked to it, rubbed its neck, and Midnight stood like a statue while being saddled.

From Midnight's saddlebags, Morgan took the Masked Rider's black accoutrements—peaked sombrero, domino mask, and long black cape. It was a perfect disguise, and never once, in all the years the Masked Rider had followed his Robin-Hoodesque career, had it been penetrated. Wayne Morgan and the Masked Rider might well have been two different men!

Morgan seemed to change physically upon donning the disguise. He no longer looked like a slow-moving, drawl-voiced, easy-going cowhand. He held himself more erect, moved more briskly, and his voice, when he spoke, would be crisp and authoritative. Outlaw, men might call the Masked Rider, but actually he was a law unto himself—and a court of justice would have found it difficult to condemn his brand of law.

The Masked Rider moved to the fire, and his bronzed, ruggedly handsome face was grim below the domino mask. He was thoughtful, reviewing in his mind all that he had learned in his encounter with Walt Owens and his meeting with Clayton Farnum. He was silent until the meal was ready and all the while he and Blue Hawk ate, then he told the Yaqui about what had happened at the Double O Ranch.

Blue Hawk nodded that he understood, then said solemnly, "There is a need here on this range for the Masked Rider, Senor. But the odds will be against you."

The Masked Rider smiled faintly.

He seldom let even the greatest odds trouble him.

FARNUM and his men rode south until they came to Sarbo Creek, dusk closing in on them upon their way back toward Santa Rosita. There were but five men with Farnum now, for he'd left one man behind to spy on Walt Owens—to make sure that the squatter, now that his headquarters had been put to the torch, would have sense enough to round up his cattle and vacate the valley range. Farnum felt well pleased with his trip to Owens' place. He'd not had to order his men to kill Owens, and that was good.

It was best for a man involved in a great undertaking to avoid bloodshed, even though Owens' killing, had it taken place, could have been justified. The law was on Farnum's side, and he wanted to keep it there—until he had become a power in this country. After that, when he had the range in the palm of his hand, he could tell the law where to head in. Clayton Farnum would make his own law.

Yes, he was satisfied that he hadn't let his men kill Owens.

Owens' being dispossessed would be a fine example for the other squatters, an example that they might now be inclined to follow.

There was a plank bridge across the Sarbo, and a man was waiting by the approach to it. He was a rail-thin, lank-faced man in need of scrubbing and barbering. His clothes, from hat to boots, should have been replaced long before; they were so shabby they gave the fellow the look of a scarecrow. He leaned lazily against a boulder, and a sorry looking horse bearing a poor saddle stood ground-hitched and dejected nearby. The fellow's jaws worked methodically upon a tobacco cud, and he spat at regular intervals as he watched the riders come up.

They reined in.

Farnum said, "Well, Parsons?"

There was contempt for the man in his tone. Sim Parsons was one of the squatters, but Farnum had gotten to him and was making use of him. He would buy the services of an informer, yet he had no respect for the breed.

Parsons didn't move, but shifted his cud to his left cheek and said, with a lazy man's drawl, "Got news for you, Mister Farnum. It should be worth a lot to you. I figure fifty dollars, maybe."

"I'll decide what it's worth."

"Yes, sir. But if you paid a hundred, it'd be cheap at the price."

"Out with it, man!"

"Well, sir," Parsons said, with aggravating slowness, "some of the squatters had a meeting last night. They decided to raise a purse for Walt Owens, so he'll have

money to make that appeal to the United States Supreme Court. Riders were all over the range today, asking for contributions. By sundown, they'd raised close to two thousand dollars. They're going to turn it over to Owens in the morning." Parsons grinned. "That's something, ain't it? It's worth plenty to know, ain't it?"

"I can't see how it's worth anything to me," Farnum told him.

Parsons face fell. "It ain't worth anything to you?"

"Not a thing."

"Well, I sort of figured—"

Farnum exchanged a look with Jake Lestrade, then said, "I'm not interested in where Owens gets his money, Parsons. Why should I be? That squatter hasn't a chance of beating me in any court. But I suppose I owe you a little something." He reached into his pocket, brought out his wallet. "Here's ten dollars for you."

Parsons came alive.

He strode forward, holding out a grimy hand.

Farnum withheld the bill, and said, "Who's holding the purse until it's turned over to Owens?"

"Marv Dodds."

"The whole amount?"

"Yes, sir," said Sim Parsons, taking his beady eyes off the ten-dollar bill long enough to give Farnum a sly look. "I happened by Marv's place about sundown. He and the others who were raising the money were counting it. After it was counted, Marv put it away in a sugar bowl in his kitchen."

"Well, like I said, it's not worth anything to me," Farnum said, and gave Parsons the money. He took another bill from his wallet. "Here's another ten dollars—to forget that you told me about this purse-raising."

He rode on at once, his men following. They clattered across the plank bridge and kept going until they were hidden by distance and the gathering darkness from Sim Parsons' sight, then Farnum halted. He lighted a cigar, smiled thinly at Jake Lestrade, and said, "That would be a nice haul for some bandidos, eh, Jake?"

"Yeah. If there were some bandidos around these parts."

"Most likely there are some."

"Could be, boss."

Farnum looked squarely at his right-hand man, and said, "Well, I'll see you boys in town." He lifted his reins and rode on alone, leaving behind him the fragrant smell of an expensive cigar.

CHAPTER VI

Riders in the Night

BURLY, blackbearded Marvin Dodds had been a rolling stone all his life until at fifty-five he had leased his portion of the Maldonado range, stocked it with cattle, and settled down to be a cowman. He'd been a sort of Old Man West himself in his time; he'd led a checkered career. He'd been a freighter on the Santa Fe Trail, a stage-driver on the Overland Express, a miner, a wrangler for a horse ranch, an Army scout, a blacksmith.

He'd worked at more trades than he could remember. Once, though Marv wouldn't admit it, he'd been a sheepherder. Now, a rancher, he was his own boss. And for the first time in his life, Marv Dodds was content.

Better still, the girl he'd married—she'd been a widow of forty on their wedding day, but he always regarded her as a girl, and a lovely one—was happy. Too, he meant to build his Slash D spread into something big for his two stepsons.

Or so he had planned until trouble came to Maldonado Rancho.

Now Marv was troubled in his mind, and he had difficulty in hiding from Louise just how worried he was. But Marv was a fighter, and if it took fighting in the courts with lawyers doing the sharpshooting—well, he'd fight. He'd help his neighbors fight, for their battle was his battle. It had been Marv Dodds who had thought of raising the purse to finance Walt Owens' appeal to the highest court in the land.

Marv was pleased with the way the other little ranchers had responded. He and six others had spread out and visited every ranch belonging to a so-called squatter, and they hadn't been denied a contribution at any spread. Of course, that worthless Sim Parsons had refused to donate anything. But later Parsons had ridden over to the Slash D and kicked in with two dollars.

The other six fund-raisers were gone, having ridden for their own spreads after the money was counted. Marv was finishing up his chores, which he'd neglected during the day, and was now in the barn milking the cow. His Louise had insisted that they keep a cow, and though Marv had no taste for milk, he liked to humor his wife.

"Marv!" his wife called from the kitchen door. "Marv, you get in here. Supper's on the table and the boys are about starved. Marv!"

Marv called back that he was coming.

He finished his milking, extinguished the lantern, picked up his milk pail, and stepped from the barn. Supper was late tonight, on account of the fund-raising, and it was already dark. Marv was halfway to the house when some riders loomed through the darkness. There were five of them, and they had sneaked up to the Slash D headquarters without a sound.

Marv was startled—scared. When he saw that the riders had their faces covered with neckerchief masks, he dropped his pail and grabbed for his gun. He knew somehow that they were after the money he'd raised.

And they weren't going to have it.

A voice partially muffled by a mask ordered harshly, "Throw up your hands, Dodds!"

It was too late. Marv Dodds' gun was out.

But its shot went into the ground, for the spokesman for the masked band had fired a slug into him. Big as he was, Marv collapsed. As he fell he saw his wife come to the kitchen door. He heard her scream. But he couldn't do anything to protect her. He lost consciousness.

But Louise Dodds had been reared on the frontier, and she reacted quickly—without panic. Her man was down, dead she thought, and she could do nothing for him. She slammed the door, barred it. She grabbed a rifle from its wall pegs, and told her two teen-aged sons, risen now from the table, to extinguish the lamp and bar the front door and then arm themselves.

A harsh voice from outside reached her, demanding, "Hand out that money you've got cached in your sugar bowl!"

The window was open, and Louise Dodds braced herself at one side of it. She leveled the rifle over the sill, and drew a bead on one of the masked riders she saw as shadowy shapes in the ranchyard. Dick, her older son, called, "I'm ready, Ma!" And Dan called, "Me too, Ma!"

The voice outside said, "Toss out that money, woman, or we'll blast your shack to pieces! You hear me!"

A warning shot racketed.

THE slug drilled through the flimsy door, shattered crockery on the supper table. Louise Dodds whispered a prayer, and squeezed the rifle trigger. A man yelled an oath, shouted, "I'm hit!" She saw him slump over his saddlehorn. Her boys started shooting with six-guns, but now the attackers withdrew. They fled only as far as the barn, however, dismounting and taking cover there. They opened up a heavy fire, and Louise Dodds feared that the plank house would really be shot to pieces.

She prayed again and again, and in her heart she silently wept.

It went on and on, and she knew that it was only a matter of time before she and her sons died as Marv had died. But she had no thought of surrender. She wouldn't give up the money that Marv had said would mean the salvation of the range—not only for Walt Owens but for every nester-rancher on Maldonado Rancho.

Despair gripped her when she caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure on the knoll behind the Slash D headquarters. The moon was beyond the knoll, big and bright, and the figure Louise Dodds saw was silhouetted against its yellow-whiteness. It was the figure of a horseman in a peaked sombrero and a flowing cape. The ranch woman thought that the rider wore a mask across the upper part of his face. She was sure that he was wholly garbed in black.

"Ma!" The yell came from Dick, who

Next Issue: THE MASKED RIDER in BLACK SHADOW TRAIL

was shooting from the window of a bedroom. "Ma, you see that one up on the knoll!"

"Yes, son!"

"I'm going to plug him!"

Louise Dodds suddenly remembered the stories she'd heard so often of a black-clad rider who in Robin Hood fashion helped those in need or in trouble. She had not known whether or not to believe those stories, but now—now she knew! She cried, "Dick, don't!"

The Masked Rider was no longer against the moon.

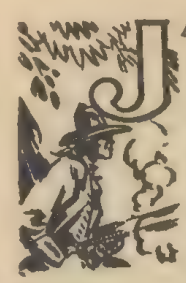
He came galloping down the slope of the knoll, charging at the outlaws in cover around the barn. They saw him and yelled warnings to each other. A couple turned their guns on him. Two others fled. One lay dead and could neither fight nor flee.

Midnight's reins were looped about his saddlehorn, and the Masked Rider used both his guns. He saw gun-flashes stabbing the darkness. He heard the vicious whine of slugs. He fired and fired again, and two men afoot crumpled to the ground. Two others had reached their horses and were high-tailing it. They fired back as they fled. The Masked Rider gave chase for nearly a mile, firing several more shots, then turned back toward the ranch headquarters. He had to find out what had happened there.

He found a woman and two boys lifting a badly wounded man from the ground when he got back. He dismounted quickly and gave them a hand. They carried the wounded man into the house and laid him upon a bed. He was still unconscious, but there was a chance, the Masked Rider saw, that the huge black-bearded man would live.

CHAPTER VII

A Fiasco and a Fire



JAKE LESTRADE did not slow up in his wild flight until he was certain that the black-masked rider had abandoned the chase. Then he reined in and began an obscene cursing. There had been fear in him for a time, but now he was crazy mad. Only he and one of his four companions had survived the raid. It had been a fiasco. But it was his failure to get possession of that two thousand dollars rather than the death of his compadres that infuriated Lestrade.

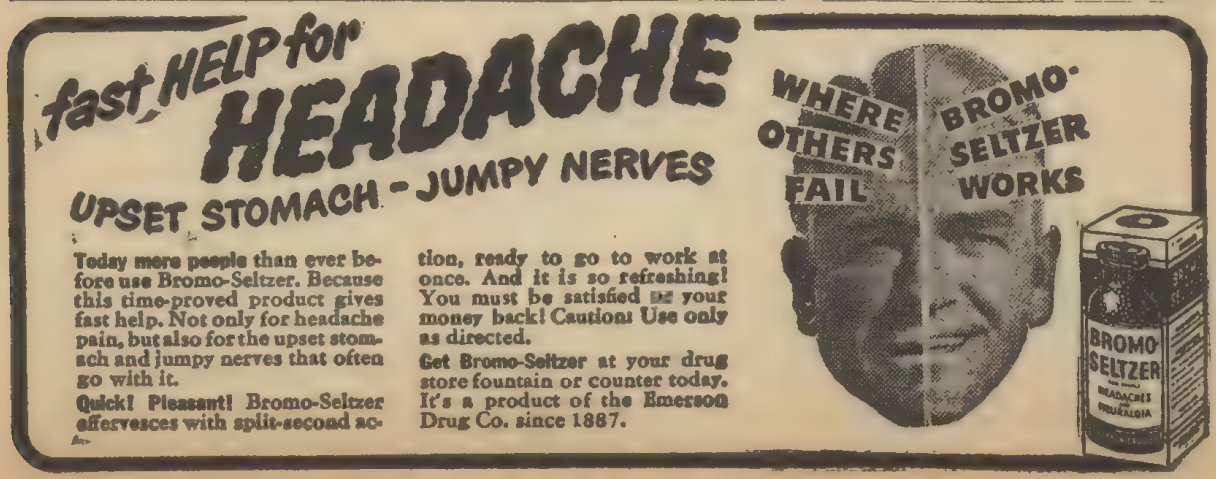
The other survivor came pounding up on a blown horse, reined in, said excitedly, "Jake, who was that hombre!"

Lestrade knew. He had traveled trails outside the law for so many years that he not only had heard of the Masked Rider but had encountered him on several occasions. He muttered an oath, told his companion, Rig Larsen, who the black-clad rider was. Rig Larsen's face blanched. He may not have encountered the Masked Rider before, but he had heard of him. Larsen felt a little sick, and he kept casting uneasy glances over his shoulder as Jake Lestrade angrily swore that he would have revenge on the meddler who had kept him from getting the money in the Dodds ranchhouse.

Finally Lestrade talked himself out.

He took out makings, rolled a cigarette, struck a match. When his cigarette was lighted, he dropped the still burning

[*Turn page*]


fast HELP for HEADACHE
UPSET STOMACH - JUMPY NERVES
Today more people than ever before use Bromo-Seltzer. Because this time-proved product gives fast help. Not only for headache pain, but also for the upset stomach and jumpy nerves that often go with it.
Quick! Pleasant! Bromo-Seltzer effervesces with split-second action, ready to go to work at once. And it is so refreshing! You must be satisfied or your money back! Caution: Use only as directed.
Get Bromo-Seltzer at your drug store fountain or counter today. It's a product of the Emerson Drug Co. since 1887.
WHERE OTHERS FAIL
BROMO-SELTZER WORKS
BROMO SELTZER
HEADACHES AND NEURALGIA

match to the ground. He saw the flare-up of the grass. He watched the little fire spread in a widening circle. Rig Larsen watched it, too, and said, "We better stamp that out. We'll have a prairie fire, sure."

He started to dismount.

Lestrade said sharply, "Wait a minute!"

He began to grin wickedly. "A prairie fire," he muttered, as though thinking out loud. "That grass is dry as tinder. Dammit; I should have thought of this before. There's nothing like a grass fire to clean out a range. We'll burn those squatters out!"

Rig Larsen gave him a startled look. "Farnum might not like it."

Lestrade sneered, "Farnum's too blamed soft. All he thinks about is using the courts to get rid of these fool squatters. He keeps telling me to take it easy—to wait. I'm done waiting."

He stared at the fire. The flames covered a wide patch now, and there was just enough wind to fan them. When the fire was spreading across twenty square feet of grass and seemed unlikely to die out, Lestrade said, "This'll show that fool woman and the Masked Rider. Let's get out of here."

He and Rig Larsen rode on, toward Santa Rosita.

When they looked back, the fire was sweeping along in a lurid wave.

A rider came pounding up to Slash D headquarters, yelling, "Grass fire! Grass fire!" To make sure the Dodds heard the alarm, he fired a shot into the air, then galloped away. Inside the plank ranchhouse, the Masked Rider had just finished doing what he could for Marv Dodds. He'd stopped the spurting flow of blood from the ugly wound in the rancher's left side by holding a dry compress to it, and then he'd bandaged it. Mrs. Dodds had helped him of course, and she'd told the man in the domino mask about the attack and the reason for it.

The Masked Rider asked, "How'd those hombres know about the money?"

It was Marv Dodds who answered, saying, "Somebody told them, and I'm betting it was that sneaky Sim Parsons. He was here when we counted the money, and he rode out toward Sarbo Creek instead of toward home when he left. He's friendly with the Farnum crowd, and I'm going to—"

His wife silenced him by placing her fingers on his lips.

He was growing too excited. He'd regained consciousness while the Masked Rider was dressing his wound, and, being rawhide tough, he was not in such bad shape as the Masked Rider had thought at first. But he was weak from shock and loss of blood, and it would be a long time before Marv Dodds was up and about—and before he settled accounts with Sim Parsons. The rancher lay still in his bed, but tried to get from it when a neighbor rode by yelling, "Grass fire!" But he fell back, betrayed by his weakness.

The Masked Rider leapt to the window, saw the ruddy glow in the sky.

He turned and followed the two Dodds boys outside. The fire was only about a mile from the Slash D ranch headquarters, and the wind was pushing it along in that direction. It was like a fiery wave, perhaps two miles in length and growing longer every second. The flames leapt high, and smoke rolled upward against the red sky. The Masked Rider saw at once that only an army of men could beat out such a fire. The Dodds ranch and doubtless others were doomed.

The Masked Rider turned to the boys. "Got a wagon?"

Dick nodded jerkily. "A light spring wagon."

"Hitch it up, Dick," the Masked Rider ordered. "Dan, you go tell your parents that they'll have to move out—fast."

As the boys leaped to obey, the Masked Rider strode to where the three dead outlaws lay. He bent over one body, stripped the neckerchief mask from the dead face. He took a match from his pocket, lighted it, and saw by its glare that the dead man had been one of the Farnum crowd. He examined the other two bodies. All three men had been at Walt Owens' ranch with Clayton Farnum.

The Masked Rider's eyes glinted like chilled steel.

He now had the measure of the enemy.

Farnum probably hadn't taken part in the raid. There had been seven men at Owens' ranch, and only five had come to the Harmon spread. Farnum had no doubt gone on to Santa Rosita, so that no one could accuse him of having had a hand

in the robbery.

The other member of the crowd had most likely been left on the Double O range, to spy upon Walt Owens. But Clayton Farnum was responsible. The Masked Rider was certain of that. And he suspected that Farnum had ordered the grass fire touched off, just as he had ordered Walt Owens' buildings put to the torch. A prairie fire was one way to clear a range of squatters!

RIDERS from neighboring ranches came galloping up, singly, in pairs, in bunches. They brought slickers, blankets, gunny-sacks—anything that could be used to beat at the flames. They rode out to meet the fire, dismounted, went on afoot. The number grew until there were more than a hundred by the time the fire was within a half a mile of the Slash D buildings, and more were coming. They labored mightily, but the wind fanned the flames and the blaze raged on.

The firefighters were driven back step by step. Sparks rained down upon them. They choked on smoke, and the heat was almost unbearable. At times the flames leapt so high, they dwarfed the largest man in the thin line of beaters. They roared and crackled. The glare grew more intense by the minute.

The Masked Rider was not idle. He helped the Dodds boys load the wagon with provisions and the family's most valuable possessions. He helped them carry Marv Dodds out and lay him upon the makeshift bed they had fixed in the wagon. Mrs. Dodds kept carrying belongings from the house to the wagon until the fire was sweeping in upon the buildings.

At last she came out with the sugar bowl containing the money raised for Walt Owens' appeal, and the Masked Rider helped her climb to the driver's seat. She took up the reins, started the team. There were tears on her cheeks as she drove away, for sparks were showering down upon her house and the other buildings. Tiny tongues of flame were beginning to lick across the roofs.

The Dodds boys turned out the horses, saddling two mounts for themselves. They remembered their mother's milk cow in the barn, and hurried to save it. Dan mounted his horse and led the cow after the wagon. Dick got gunny-sacks for himself and the Masked Rider, and they joined the firefighters.

It was a losing battle, and every man knew it. The Dodds buildings went up in flames and smoke, and the fire raced on. Men lost hope and deserted. No one could blame them, for they went to move their families out of harm's way and to save what possessions they could. By midnight, the wall of flame was a half-dozen miles long. It continued to lengthen. A vast expanse of the nester-ranchers' range was already burned over, and the men, when they paused for breath, asked each other how many cattle had died.

A dozen ranch headquarters were destroyed before sunup, and others were threatened. The wind held, fanning the flames. A great smoke pall lay over the range when full daylight came. The men who remained, and they were few by then, were dirty and sweaty and played out—And despairing. They gathered together and decided to give up the fight, and each man attempt to save his own ranch buildings. Those who had already lost their headquarters could help those not yet burned out. They caught up their horses and rode slowly away, and then the fire spread unhindered.

The Masked Rider watched from a rise of ground, feeling a vast anger rather than despair. From his high position he could see the blackened range beyond the flames and smoke. The range was burned out as far as the eye could reach, and the destruction was not yet completed. Someone, the Masked Rider told himself, must pay for this evil waste of precious grass, valuable livestock and cherished homes.

That someone was Clayton Farnum.

CHAPTER VIII

Morgan Enters a Wolf Den

ROARING flames were still five miles or more from the valley range of the Double O, and it appeared to the Masked Rider that Walt Owens' spread would escape damage unless the wind veered. The entrance to the valley was not directly in the path of the fire. The Masked Rider saw nothing of Owens as he rode north across the Double

O. Owens had not started to round up his cattle preparatory to vacating his range, so the Masked Rider assumed that the rancher had joined the other ranchers in their futile fight against the holocaust.

The Masked Rider had told Blue Hawk to move their camp to a ravine about a mile north of Owens' ranch, and the Yaqui was waiting there. "Prairie fire, Senor?" Blue Hawk asked, nodding in the direction of the vast smoke cloud to the south.

The now grim-faced Masked Rider nodded. He briefly told the Yaqui of the night's happenings, of how he had heard gunfire while riding toward the town of Santa Rosita, and of the attack upon the Dodds ranch. The Masked Rider's voice was bitter, angry, and the Yaqui, who also hated renegades who made war upon their fellowmen, frowned darkly.

"What are your plans, Senor?" Blue Hawk asked.

"I'm going to smash the Farnum crowd —or die in the attempt," the Masked Rider said flatly. "It won't be easy. Clayton Farnum is both smart and ruthless. I'll have to outwit and outfight him. I'm going to Santa Rosita today, as Wayne Morgan, and then pay the Maldonado hacienda a visit. You can drift over toward the hacienda, amigo, and we'll meet there. I may need your help."

THE Masked Rider removed his black attire, and when he rode out, mounted upon the roan, he had again assumed the appearance of a drifting cowhand. He'd washed up at the spring in the ravine, eaten breakfast, and caught a couple hours sleep. He dropped down onto Double O range, and found that Walt Owens had returned. The rancher was camped near his burned ranch buildings, and he too had just washed up and eaten breakfast. He'd spent the night fighting the fire, the smoke of which could still be seen in a vast cloud to the south of the hills rimming the Double O range.

Owens greeted Morgan in friendly fashion, and the look of madness he had shown yesterday was wholly gone. He now appeared merely grimly determined. As Morgan dismounted, Owens said, "You weren't just bragging, friend, when you said that you knew the Masked Rider. He was riding Maldonado range last night. He broke up an attack on the Dodds spread by some of Farnum's gunslicks and later helped fight the grass fire."

Morgan nodded, said, "He told me that he's going to see this range war through to the finish, Walt. He asked me to do some investigating for him. Want to join me?"

"Sure. Where are you headed?"

"First to Santa Rosita, then to Maldonado Rancho headquarters."

"I'll saddle a mount," Owens said eagerly.

The prairie fire had veered from the entrance to the Double O valley range. The wind was driving the flames toward a range of low hills toward the east. Walt Owens' cattle were safe.

But great damage was done.

The heart of the range leased by the other nester-ranchers was burned out, and the two men rode over an area as desolate as the moon. It was a charred waste strewn with the carcasses of cattle, and the black ruins of ranch headquarters could be seen in every direction. Smoke still curled in thin strands from some of the gutted buildings. The range was almost devoid of humans.

The ranchers were moving out with their families and what belongings they had saved, traveling southward by wagons in a forlorn exodus. Nothing, it seemed to Wayne Morgan, was more pitiful than people fleeing from a catastrophe.

He and the grim-faced Owens passed groups of refugees along the road to Santa Rosita. The faces of the women were bleak, those of the children were frightened. The men—men hid their feelings more than women and children, but anger smouldered in their eyes.

"There'll be trouble when these people reach town," Morgan said. "They believe Farnum had his men touch off the fire."

"He'll deny it," Owens said. "And they'll not be able to prove what they believe." He shook his head sadly. "No, there'll be no trouble. Most of the ranchers are family men, and they'll take a lot before they risk their lives bucking Farnum's gunslicks. Not because they're scared, but because they've got their wives and kids to consider. They're whipped, and they know it."

"It was an easy victory for Farnum."

"Too easy," Owens said thickly.

SANTA ROSITA was a dozen miles south of Owens' range, and it was midday when they rode in. The town was a typical southwestern cowtown, partly adobe and partly unpainted plank. There were two stores, several saloons, a livery stable and blacksmith shop, a stage company office, a few smaller business places. A sizable portion of the population was Mexican. There was a new false-fronted building bearing a freshly painted sign that read: SOUTHWEST LAND DEVELOPMENT COMPANY—C. A. FARNUM, PRESIDENT.

Morgan was about to ride over to Farnum's office building when Walt Owens called his attention to a palomino gelding tethered to the hitch-rack in front of a saloon.

"That's Arturo O'Reilly's horse. Arturo must be in Kelly's Bar."

"He's one of the Maldonado family?"

"Don Miguel's grandson."

Morgan nodded. "Round him up," he said. "I'll want to ask him some questions. We'll ride to his ranch with him."

Owens halted by the saloon, and Morgan swung over to the office building of Farnum's land company. He dismounted, strode directly to the open door. A clerk worked at a desk in the front office. He was a thin-faced man of about fifty, and he had an indoor worker's pallor. Across the room was a door to another office, and Morgan heard voices rumbling there. It sounded like an angry argument.

"Farnum back there?" Morgan asked bluntly, opening the gate in the railing across the front part of the room. "I want to see him."

"Mr. Farnum's busy."

"No matter," said Morgan, and went through the gate. He saw the clerk, startled now, rise to intercept him. He said curtly, "Don't, friend. Don't get in my way."

The man shrank back, and Morgan went on to the door. The word *private* was painted on it. Morgan smiled. He grasped the knob, flung the door open, walked in on a heated discussion between Farnum and Jake Lestrade. Farnum stood behind his desk, and he was scowling. Lestrade's back was toward Morgan, but the hardcase whirled upon seeing his boss give someone behind him a startled look.

Lestrade grabbed for his gun with an oath, the instant he recognized Morgan. But he was caught off balance. Before he was in firing position, Morgan had leapt in close and driven a blow to his face. Lestrade uttered a grunt, reeled backwards, collided with the desk, spilled atop it. Morgan followed him up, wrenched the gun from Lestrade's fist, stepped back.

He covered both Lestrade and Farnum with the six-gun, but the former was too dazed to try anything more and the latter coolly put a cigar in his mouth and struck a match. Morgan kicked the door closed, stood with his back to it. Lestrade got clumsily from the desk, spilling papers to the floor, and staggered to the side wall. He slumped against the wall, breathing hard, bleeding from a cut lip, staring at Morgan with hate-filled eyes.

Morgan was smiling, but there was no real amusement in his smile. He said, "I'm just a drifting cowpoke. I walked in here because I was invited to drop in. And this no-good son tries to gun me down. You put him up to that, Mister Farnum?"

Farnum got his cigar lighted. He smiled as he drew on it. He was bland, his manner was determinedly friendly, but his dark eyes were wary. "Come to take that job I offered you, Morgan?"

"You hire him, and you'll be hiring trouble," Jake Lestrade broke in huskily. "I tell you I know this hombre. He's a trouble-maker. I'd gamble a month's pay that he's in cahoots with that Masked Rider!"

Farnum gave him a scowling look. "I told you before to stop trying to run my business," he said flatly. "It looks as though you're getting too big for your britches. Keep quiet until you're spoken to." He turned back to Morgan, his pretense of friendliness gone. Clayton Farnum was a large-scale schemer, not a fool, and he was not ignoring Lestrade's suspicions of Wayne Morgan. "You want that job, Morgan?" he demanded.

"No."

"Why are you here, then?"

"To call you a blackguard, mister," said Wayne Morgan.

NEXT ISSUE
HALF-PINT LAW
by FRANCIS H. AMES
AND OTHER EXCITING STORIES

CHAPTER IX

Wayne Morgan Turns Kidnaper

FARNUM jerked the cigar from his mouth, flung it to the desk. His face turned livid with rage, and he said, almost shouting now, "I won't take that, even with a gun on me! Listen, you saddle bum—"

Morgan broke in, "You sent your toughs to the Dodds ranch to steal the money the ranchers contributed for Walt Owens' appeal."

Farnum struck the desk with his fist. "Prove that!" he raged.

Morgan was as cool as Farnum was angry. He said evenly, "That's easy. Three of those toughs were killed. I saw their bodies. They were your men, Farnum."

"What my employes do in their own time is none of my business!"

"That's a brand-new idea, mister."

"Maybe. But I'm standing behind it."

"You're denying too, I guess, that you ordered your gunslicks to set fire to the nester-ranchers' range."

"Of course I deny it," Farnum said. "I'm not such a fool that I'd burn range I want to stock with cattle." He had his rage under a measure of control now. "I deny the accusations," he said more calmly. "I'm a businessman, not the leader of a wild bunch. I also deny that you have a right to concern yourself in my affairs—unless you're other than what you claim. If you're a lawman, show me your credentials."

"If I was a lawman, I'd start you on your way to the pen."

"Since you're not, I suggest that you put an end to your meddling."

"And let you have a free hand, eh, Farnum?"

"And save yourself a lot of grief," Farnum said flatly.

Morgan showed one of his unamused smiles. There was no mistaking the threat behind Farnum's words. From now on, from the moment he stopped covering these two men, Wayne Morgan's life would be in danger. Farnum might not hate him as Lestrade did, but the range-grabber was shrewd enough to know that this self-styled drifter more than any man on Maldonado range was dangerous. They would now try to find a way to do away with him. Morgan tossed Lestrade's six-gun onto the desk, almost contemptuously.

He said, "I'll be willing to take on a load of grief if I smash you and your crowd in the end, Farnum. I made up my mind to that when I saw how you operate. And I think you can be smashed." His face was rocky now, his eyes chill. "I think you've got a weak spot, and when I find it—"

He let the threat remain unspoken.

He opened the door, backed out, pulled it closed.

As the door closed behind Morgan, Jake Lestrade leapt away from the wall and grabbed the gun off the desk. He turned to the door, wildness in him. He meant to back-shoot the drifter. His left hand was on the doorknob, turning it, when Farnum's voice reached him. Jake Lestrade was a brute when aroused, but there was a wide streak of cowardice in him. And Farnum's words knifed through him, for the man said, "You fool! You open that door, he'll gun you down!"

Lestrade froze, chilled by alarm.

He'd had a bad scare last night when that Masked Rider broke up the raid upon the Dodds spread. To make matters worse, Farnum had been tongue-lashing him for firing the range—despite the fact that the prairie fire had driven out the squatters. Farnum too had given Lestrade a scare. Jake Lestrade had never seen his boss use a gun, yet he feared him. His fear of Clayton Farnum was based on his awareness that the man was devilishly shrewd. Lestrade knew how deviously his boss' mind worked, and how easily he could ruin anyone who crossed him.

JAKE LESTRADE didn't want to run afoul of Clayton Farnum as had Walt Owens and Arturo O'Reilly. He turned slowly to face Farnum.

"He meant what he said, boss. He'll find a way to smash you."

"If he lives long enough," said Farnum.

"You mean?"

"Catch him off guard," Farnum replied, making an order of it. "Rig an ambush. I don't know what he is, but he's not just a saddle bum. He's smart and he's tough, and you'd be a fool—a dead fool, most

likely—to buck his guns. I've a hunch that you're right about him being in cahoots with the Masked Rider. Round up some of the boys and fix him. And if you can get the Masked Rider, so much the better. Plenty of lawmen will pay bounty for that masked hombre's hide, so there's a chance for you to cash in. But you've got to show more sense than you've been showing lately. It'll take brains as well as guns."

Lestrade looked offended. "I'll find a way to outsmart them," he muttered. "I'll take Morgan alive, somehow, and force him to tell me the location of the Masked Rider's hideout."

Farnum growled, "All right, but move fast." He picked up his cigar, relighted it. He considered a moment, then said, "Things are coming to a head. I can't afford to let matters drift any longer. I want a show-down with Arturo O'Reilly. Bring him here before you start on Morgan."

Lestrade nodded, went out, and Farnum dropped wearily into his chair and smoked and worried. Matters were getting out of hand. Walt Owens was hell-bent on appealing to a higher court, and the other squatters were financing his appeal. Lestrade's failure at the Dodds ranch had been a setback, and the young tough's firing the range had been a fool stunt—even though it had driven out the squatters. The presence of the Masked Rider was alarming, and even this drifter, Morgan, was a threat.

Farnum had also had another stroke of bad luck during the night. He'd sent two of his crowd, Yuma Bates and Charlie Maul, a pair of escaped convicts and killers, to bushwhack Don Miguel O'Reilly. He'd wanted the old man out of the way because he feared that O'Reilly would probe into his rusty memory and remember where the Maldonado land grant document was hidden. The recovery of that paper could mean disaster to Farnum's plans.

And Bates and Maul had bungled the bushwhack. They'd wounded old Don Miguel, let him get away. They'd had to go back for their horses, and then hadn't been able to hunt the old rannihan down!

Clayton Farnum began to fear that he was building on quicksand. He wanted to control a vast cattle empire, but his dream was suddenly turning into a nightmare. He slammed his fist down upon the desk. He would have to force a show-down, now, at once, and he'd begin with Arturo O'Reilly. He wanted Maldonado Rancho, the whole of it, and he was going to have it—one way or another!

Farnum considered himself a man of destiny, but knew he would have to make his own destiny. He was contemptuous of his fellowmen, except for the few whose stake in life was as great as the one he wanted for himself, and he was willing to trample down any number of weaker men in his climb toward his goal. And he would now trample Arturo O'Reilly.

The door opened.

Jake Lestrade came in—alone.

"Where's young O'Reilly?" Farnum demanded.

"Morgan's with him," Lestrade said uneasily. "Morgan and Walt Owens."

A look of shock spread over Clayton Farnum's face.

ARTURO Esteban Patricio Maldonado y O'Reilly was very drunk despite it being but the middle of the day. He was also very much in love, he believed, with a doll-like girl named Rita. He was a handsome youth, more Spanish than Irish in appearance, and very spoiled. He wore expensive clothes; he rated the best tailor in Denver, and also the best haberdasher. Arturo, when sober, cut a fine figure.

Under the influence of the rotgut whiskey sold in Kelly's Bar, Arturo was a sorry figure. He was bitter against the whole world, and Rita, the percentage girl in Kelly's, cheered him up not at all. Arturo wanted to marry her. His family would never permit it; old Don Miguel—as truly Irish as they come and pretending to be a Spanish *haciendado*—would disown him. Disinherit him. And, as Rita kept saying, "But how would we live, darling, without money?"

Arturo was sitting in the saloon with the girl when the two men came in and strode directly to his table. He knew the one, Walt Owens, a poor two-bit rancher, but the other man, the big bronzed man with alert blue eyes, was a total stranger. Arturo looked at them, disliked them. He disliked Owens because his sister, Conchita, had taken a fancy to the man and said, too often, "If you were only half the

man Walt Owens is!" He disliked the stranger because his chill blue eyes seemed to look right into a man—and read him for the weakling he was.

Owens said, "Arturo, let's take a little ride."

Arturo sneered, "With you? Not for a thousand dollars." He hiccoughed, muttered an excuse-me to the girl. He reached out, took her hand. "When I leave here, it'll be with Rita-baby—not with a two-bit rancher who smells of cows."

Owens looked helplessly at his companion.

The stranger said flatly, "You'll come along peaceably, friend, or we'll take you by force. What'll it be?"

The girl cried, "Of all the nerve!" But the threat of violence lay in this stranger's words, and Arturo, a man who feared and hated violence, recognized it despite the whiskey addling his mind. Arturo knew that he was going to take a little ride with Walt Owens and the stranger.

CHAPTER X

The Bare Bones of Treason

IT WAS a longer ride than Arturo had anticipated. He was so sick from the rotgut whiskey, the jolt of the saddle, and the glare of the sun in his eyes that he feared that he would collapse and fall to the ground. He felt so sick he wondered if he was going to die, and he didn't much care.

Finally, when the youth was in a half-stupor, Wayne Morgan said, "We'll stop here for a little while." He and Owens helped Arturo get down from the palomino. They'd halted by a shallow stream, in the shade of a huge willow tree. They removed Arturo's fine Stetson, lowered him, dunked his head into the water. They stretched him out in the shade, and let him rest.

Rolling a smoke, Morgan watched the youth with more pity than contempt. He judged Arturo to be a weakling who'd got in with bad company, and he asked, "What really ails him?"

Owens shrugged. "All I know is what his sister tells me about him. Conchita—" the young rancher spoke the name softly and with a certain feeling— "says Arturo hates the range country. He was away to school in the East for a couple of years, and he wanted to stay there. Don Miguel, his grandfather, wouldn't hear of it. He stopped sending the kid money, so Arturo had to come home. He's been like this ever since.

"He's got high-faluting ideas. Figures he's too good to be a ranchero, and he's not much help to old Don Miguel. He's been hanging around Santa Rosita ever since Farnum and his crowd moved in, and I figure Farnum's got some kind of hold on him—one besides that girl."

"She's one of Farnum's crowd?" Morgan asked.

"Yeah. Farnum and Pat Kelly are thick as thieves. Kelly opened his saloon when Farnum opened his land company office. He's more tinhorn gambler than saloonkeeper. He runs some big poker games in a back room of his place, and Arturo sits in most of them."

"How's Arturo's luck at cards?"

"Like it is at love," Walt Owens said. "Not so good."

"Why would Farnum be interested in him?" Morgan asked. Then, as Owens shook his head, he bent over the man on the ground. He shook Arturo roughly, finally rousing him from his stupor. "Wake up, friend," he said. "I want to talk with you."

Arturo muttered an oath, told Morgan to leave him alone, but after some more rough shaking, he came around and sat up. He was pale. He looked sick. He held his head in his hands, and said like a beggar, "Go away, won't you? Can't you see I'm sick as a dog?"

"A dog has more sense. Why do you drink so much of that rotgut?"

"That's my business."

"You're sure making a fool of yourself."

Arturo lifted his head, stared at Morgan with bloodshot eyes. His pride was wounded. "I'm no kid," he said sullenly. "I can do as I like. What's it to you, anyway? Who are you?"

Morgan told him his name, then said sharply, "What's Clayton Farnum want from you, Arturo?" He didn't actually expect the youth to give him a truthful answer, but he was hoping that Arturo, still far from being sobered up, might blurt out something incriminating against Far-

num. So he was a little surprised when Arturo muttered, "Clayt wants me to find something for him."

"What?" Morgan demanded. "What does he want you to find?"

"A paper. Just an old paper."

Morgan exchanged a look with Walt Owens, then said, "Farnum wants you to find the lost land grant paper for Maldonado Rancho—and turn it over to him. Is that it?"

Arturo looked startled. "I didn't say that!" he said, and struggled to his feet. He stood swaying, glaring at Morgan. "Leave me alone!" he muttered. "What are you trying to pump me for?"

"What'll Farnum give you for it?"

"I'm not talking, dammit!"

"What'll he give you?"

Arturo uttered a sound that was much like a sob. "He'll tear up some IOU's of mine," he said dully. "Gambling debts. More than seven thousand dollars. I can't pay them off because that old fool, Don Miguel won't give me any money. My own grandfather!"

"That's not much for such an important paper."

"He's doing more for me. Clayt's all right. He's my friend. The only friend I've got, besides Rita." He gave Morgan a defiant look, as though daring him to say a word against Clayton Farnum. "He's given me five thousand in cash, so I can take Rita away and marry her. Clayt Farnum's all right, I tell you!"

"Sure, sure," said Morgan. "Let's move on."

THEY got Arturo mounted and forced him to ride on toward Maldonado Rancho headquarters despite his protests that he wanted to return to Santa Rosita. Wayne Morgan was silent, thoughtful. It was an ugly business, a man selling out his own family. It was clear to Morgan—and to Walt Owens too, of course—that Farnum was attempting one of the biggest range steals of all time, that he wanted not only the range he claimed under the Gonzales grant but the whole of Maldonado Rancho, and that he was well on his way to success.

To a man with less knowledge of criminally inclined schemers, Farnum's gran-

[Turn page]

WHO ELSE WANTS
Better Shaves at Less Cost?

NOW! this Top Quality FULL-WEIGHT Blade in Handy DISPENSER
10 for 25¢

REGULAR PACK
3 for 10¢

Make this TOUGH SPOT TEST →

To Try this rugged Blue Star on hard-to-shave spots. If any other blade, at *any* price, gives you finer shaves than Blue Star, we'll give you double your money back.

Blue STAR
SINGLE EDGE DOUBLE EDGE

PRECISION A·S·R PRODUCTS AMERICAN SAFETY RAZOR CORP. • BROOKLYN 1, N. Y.

diose plan to wrest control of a vast range might have seemed too fantastic to have a chance of succeeding. But Wayne Morgan, with his wide experience with the ruthless breed, an experience gained under the guise of the Masked Rider, knew that Farnum had planned well and launched his scheme only after being convinced that it would not fail.

And it might not fail!

Morgan saw how deftly the man played his cards. He'd had the Territorial Court brand Walt Owens a squatter, and upon that precedent he could now justify the burning of the leased range to drive out the other nester-ranchers. And with the Maldonado title lost, Farnum could contest Don Miguel O'Reilly's claim to the part of the range not under the Gonzales grant.

There was, Morgan realized, but one threat to Farnum's success. If the lost title was found, the man could be blocked. Don Miguel could prove up his claim, contest the Gonzales grant, and smash Farnum's ambitions. Farnum was aware that the missing document might be found, and that explained his attempt to influence Arturo. If the Spanish title was found, Farnum wanted it found by Arturo, so that it would come into his hands, to be destroyed.

Two hours after leaving the creek where Arturo had been partially sobered, the three riders topped a ridge in a range of low sagebrush hills and saw the headquarters of Maldonado Rancho. It resembled a Mexican village, and it was, in fact, just that. Like all the old haciendas, this one supported many people. There were vaqueros and sheepherders to handle the livestock scattered across the grass flats and through the low hills. There were peons who worked the farmland and did the many chores of a great establishment.

These Mexicans had wives and children, and so it required many adobe huts for their quarters. And a well-stocked commissary. There were many necessary ranch buildings. And, dominating all, there was the Maldonado family's house —*la casa*. It was a sizeable village, and it had stood there for many generations. Some of the adobe walls were ancient.

As Morgan and his companions rode from the ridge, they saw three riders come out from the hacienda to meet them. They came on at a gallop, and at first Morgan thought they were all vaqueros. Then he heard Walt Owens murmur, "It's Conchita!"

The rancher lifted his horse to a lope and headed the oncoming trio off. Morgan sensed that something was wrong, but Arturo seemed not to suspect it. When they reached Owens and the riders from the ranch headquarters, Morgan saw anguish in the eyes of Conchita O'Reilly and uneasiness in the manner of the two vaqueros with her. Owens said, "Don Miguel's missing, Morgan. They're afraid he's dead."

"How long has he been missing?"

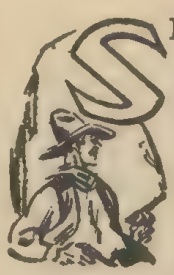
"He rode out just before sundown last evening," Conchita said. "He often rode alone. We didn't worry that he stayed so long last night, but when his horse came in. . . ."

Her voice broke, and she was unable to go on.

One of the vaqueros said, "Don Miguel's horse came home with a bloody saddle, Senores. We searched all night, and all day. Every man on Maldonado Rancho is still searching. We fear that he is dead!"

CHAPTER XI

Brenoso Bushwhack



SEARCHING for a solution, Wayne Morgan asked, "Which direction did Don Miguel take when he rode out?"

It was Conchita who answered, "North. He liked to ride where it was lonely, and usually he rode toward the Brenoso Hills." Despite her anxiety, her voice was like pleasant music. She was as beautiful as her brother was handsome, but while the Spanish blood of the Maldonados was strong in Arturo, Conchita, with auburn hair and blue eyes, showed more of the Irish strain. There were other differences between brother and sister; the girl was made of sterner stuff, and put the weak Arturo to shame. "We have searched as far as the Brenosos," she went on, "and west to the Moradas."

"What about the rest of the range?" Morgan asked. "Don Miguel may have

started north, but then turned south."

"The vaqueros are combing the south range now," Conchita replied. "They haven't found anything, for if they had, they would have reported."

"Don Miguel has enemies?"

"No. Don Miguel was always a friendly man and well liked."

"What about Clayton Farnum?"

Conchita didn't answer. She looked from Morgan to her brother, and Arturo, seeing accusation in her eyes, flared up, "That's crazy! Clayt Farnum isn't a bushwhacker. Besides, he has no reason for wanting Don Miguel dead. Why should he? He knows the old man can't contest that Gonzales title. Clayt's my friend, and I won't let anybody call him a bushwhacker!"

Conchita said thickly, "All right, Arturo." She looked back at Wayne Morgan and Walt Owens. "I believe my grandfather has been murdered, but I don't know who would take the life of such a fine old man." She was fighting to hold back tears.

"I doubt if he ever harmed anyone in his life. He always tried to help people. When the ranchers came and asked to lease the east range, he said 'yes' without a moment's hesitation. And he charged them hardly anything at all. When Clayton Farnum came and threatened to dispossess them, Don Miguel humbled himself and begged the man not to be hard on them."

"Clayt has the right to drive them out," Arturo broke in.

"He has nothing but a worthless title," Conchita retorted fiercely. "Everyone knows that the courts will set aside the Gonzales grant when the Maldonado title is found!"

The vaquero who had spoken before interrupted, "There is one thing, Senores. We found while searching the north range where two riders had stopped some time yesterday. They were not our vaqueros, but outsiders."

Morgan was instantly alert. "That could mean something," he said. "Where is the spot?"

"Close to the Brenoso Hills, Senor."

"How about taking me there?"

"*Si*," said the vaquero. "If Dona Conchita says it is all right."

The girl gave Morgan a searching look. Walt Owens had neglected to introduce him because Conchita was distraught, but he did so now. Owens explained that Morgan had befriended him against the Farnum crowd, and Conchita managed to smile and say, "Any friend of Walt's is welcome at Maldonado Rancho."

She leaned forward in the saddle, gave Morgan her hand. She wore a mannish shirt with a divided riding skirt, and her flat-crowned Stetson hung at her shoulders by its chin-strap. Her dudish brother didn't look as though he belonged on the range, but Conchita O'Reilly was certainly a ranch girl. Morgan suspected that Walt Owens was in love with the girl, and thought, "I sure don't blame him!"

Conchita said, "I don't think you'll be able to learn anything by visiting the place where those two men camped, but Hernandez will take you there."

Morgan nodded. He told Owens, "I'll see you later," and, with Herandez, turned north. They rode at a mile-eating lope, and Morgan puzzled over Don Miguel's disappearance. Without a doubt, the man had been bushwhacked. The bloody saddle on his horse was proof of that. On such a great range, the searching vaqueros could have missed a hundred spots where a man might lie dead or wounded.

Morgan knew that Clayton Farnum, Jake Lestrade and five others had been riding the leased range the night before at the time of Don Miguel's bushwhacking. But that didn't clear Farnum entirely. The man could have sent others of his gunslicks on a bushwhack ride while he was serving that writ of ejectment on Walt Owens.

WHY would Farnum want Don Miguel murdered? The motive seemed clear enough to Morgan. Farnum feared that the old Spanish title to Maldonado Rancho would be found. He'd realized that Don Miguel, rather than Arturo, might find it. And he'd decided to sidestep that danger by having Don Miguel bushwhacked.

The terrain close to the brushy hills grew rougher, changed from grass flats to a rocky, broken stretch. It was wild and lonely country, much like the malpais on the other side of the Brenosos. Hernandez led the way into a tangle of rocks and mesquite, in the center of which was a small

clearing. A first glance showed Wayne Morgan that two men and two horses had spent some time there recently—in hiding.

There were boot and hoof tracks in the sandy soil. Cigarette butts, burned matches, discarded bits of food littered the ground.

"You followed their tracks away from here?"

Hernandez nodded. "Those two came and went in that direction," he said, and pointed toward the east. "They kept to the base of the Brenosos until they reached the sagebrush range that divides Maldonado range. There we lost their trail."

Morgan was sure that the two mysterious visitors to the spot had come from and returned to Santa Rosita, by a circuitous route. There was little use in following their trail to the town, since they could not be identified, so Morgan turned his roan and began to cut for more sign. He rode a gradually widening circle about the hideout, and came finally, half a mile away, to an arroyo. It had carried water recently but now showed only mud and a few puddles of stagnant water. But in the mud were tracks—boot tracks. He saw too an empty cartridge in the arroyo.

Morgan reined in, said to Hernandez, "I'd bet that Don Miguel was bushwhacked here. The two ambushers saw him coming along and came here afoot to gun him down."

The vaquero's eyes glittered with anger. "*Si*," he muttered. "And now we'll find *el jefe's* body—no?"

Morgan dismounted, descended the arroyo bank. He studied the boot tracks, but learned nothing from them. He picked up the fired cartridge. It had been fired from a rifle. It was a .30-30 cartridge. It was of no help. Nearly every rider packed a Winchester .30-30 on his saddle. Morgan returned to his roan, mounted, and he and Hernandez rode a wide circle about the ambushers' spot in the arroyo. There was a grass flat to the west of the arroyo, and Morgan was sure that Don Miguel had been crossing it when fired upon. There was a confusion of hoof marks across the flat, for the vaqueros had searched it thoroughly during the day. It was impossible to know which tracks had been left by Don Miguel's mount.

Morgan decided that Don Miguel had been hit but not knocked from the saddle. Wounded, he'd hung on and ridden away. But he'd not been able to make it back to ranch headquarters. Somewhere he'd toppled from the saddle, dead or unconscious. And his mount, its reins tied, had drifted away, finally returning home.

Morgan peered about.

Somewhere upon that vast expanse of range the dead or dying Don Miguel O'Reilly lay—and somehow had to be found.

A gunshot racketed.

A slug shrieked past Morgan's head.

He looked about and saw a band of riders coming along the base of the Brenoso Hills, from the east. There were eight of them, riding hard through the rocks and brush, and Jake Lestrade was in the lead. They'd followed him from Santa Rosita, Morgan realized. Farnum had learned that he and Walt Owens had ridden toward Maldonado Rancho headquarters with Arturo O'Reilly, and had decided that he was too dangerous to be allowed to live. Lestrade had his reins looped over his saddlehorn and had both hands free to handle his rifle. He fired again, as Morgan reached for his own rifle, and Hernandez uttered a strangling sound.

The vaquero pitched from his saddle, hit the ground in a lifeless heap. Lestrade was about to fire again. Morgan dropped from the saddle and took a prone shooting position on the ground. The odds were against him. He hadn't much chance of coming out of this alive. But he fired his first shot, and missed. The Farnum gunmen came on, guns blasting.

CHAPTER XII

Arturo Asks for Action

ARROYO-stymied, the attackers paused for a moment. It was a deep gully with banks too steep for horses to descend and climb safely, and also too wide for them to jump. Farther south it widened with sloping banks, as Morgan had found, but Lestrade and his companions, firing wildly, gave no thought to finding an easy crossing. They left their horses, went afoot into the arroyo. Morgan's second shot caught the last man to reach its bank. The hit

man screamed and fell loosely downward, then, for a time, Morgan had no target.

They kept down behind the bank nearest Morgan's position while spreading out, and when they finally renewed the attack, they were scattered along a hundred yards and exposed no more of themselves than was necessary to use their weapons.

Their fire pinned Morgan down, kept him from drawing bead on any one of them, and it would have meant instant death for him to have retreated. A dozen slugs would have torn into him the instant he got to his feet. He could hug the ground and make it difficult for them to target him, yet it would be but a matter of minutes before a lucky shot would find him.

Surrender?

There was no surrender to the lawless breed, for it would merely hasten the victim's end. Morgan had spent too long a time traveling the danger trails to expect mercy at the hands of such men. He knew fear, but was its master. He would not give way to panic. Life was precious, however, even for a man who constantly flirted with death, and a dull despair built up in Morgan as he fired an occasional futile shot. Impatient, Jake Lestrade yelled an order and the man farthest north along the arroyo worked his way some distance from his first position. From there, this man had a better command of Morgan's position and his first shot came close enough to kick dirt into the besieged man's face.

Morgan twisted around and triggered a shot at the man out-flanking him, but missed. He got no second shot, for the other toughs began a heavy shooting to pin him down. Morgan could only wait then for the man beading him to finish him off.

And the fellow was readying his shot.

Morgan saw, as slugs from the other guns shrieked over his position, the rifle that now had him in its sights. He could see the rifleman's ugly face behind the steadied barrel, and his slitted eyes. . . . He saw something more, something that made his heart leap with hope. A stealthy figure moved through the rocks and brush east of the arroyo.

The figure of Blue Hawk.

An arrow in flight made no sound, and neither Lestrade nor any of his men heard the twang of Blue Hawk's bow. All of them heard the scream that ripped itself from the gunman at the north end of the arroyo, but only Morgan saw the tufted shaft protruding from the man's back as he fell.

The simulated cry of a mountain lion rang out.

Morgan answered it, and as the weird sounds rose the guns of Lestrade and his companions fell silent. Then Lestrade's harsh voice called out, "What happened? What's wrong with Brazos?"

A man went to find out, and exposed himself. Morgan's slug struck him from one side, one of Blue Hawk's arrows found him from the other side. Three were now dead or wounded out of the eight, and Morgan could almost feel the fear sweeping through the five other men in the arroyo. He heard Lestrade curse and yell at one of his partners, "You're loco! There're no Indians in these parts!"

The Yaqui shot an arrow upward, arcing it so that it fell into the arroyo. It must have landed close to Lestrade's position, for he shouted in panic, "Let's get out of here!"

He and four others scrambled from the arroyo, fled toward their horses. Morgan fired from a kneeling position, unhampered now, and, sharply aware that these men deserved no mercy, did his best to bring them down. He winged one man, but the fellow managed to haul himself onto his horse. An arrow struck the thigh of another; the man screamed and pulled the shaft out, leaving the flint head embedded in the wound.

LESTRADE got away first, using his spurs cruelly, and the other four, galloping after him, served to shield him. Morgan fired again but missed, and then the riders were in among the brush and rocks—impossible targets. They fled east, pushing their horses for all they were worth.

Blue Hawk broke from his cover, trotted across to Morgan. The Yaqui had killed without hesitation, but did not gloat over his victims. His savage nature had been self-tamed, and Wayne Morgan knew that his trail-mate was far more civilized than many men with white skin. Blue Hawk said, "You are not hurt, Senor?"

"No. Thanks to you. How'd you happen

to show up just now?"

"I reached the edge of the malpais with our outfit, then scouted ahead. The horses are hidden in a little canyon yonder. I saw these riders coming, then sighted you, Senor—you and the vaquero."

"Lucky for me that you did."

"The vaquero is dead?"

Morgan nodded grimly, then explained briefly to the Yaqui what had happened since they had parted that morning. Blue Hawk's dark eyes glittered, and he said solemnly, "Senor, your life is in danger."

Again Morgan nodded. "Farnum fears me," he said simply. "Lestrade hates me. They'll not rest until they've killed me—or I kill them."

Blue Hawk frowned. His right hand went to the knife in his sash, and he said tonelessly, "Say the word, Senor, and I will track these men down. I could strike in the dark, like a shadow."

"No; you wouldn't have a chance," Morgan told him. "Farnum and Lestrade and their entire crew will be on guard now, expecting trouble. I won't send you into a trap. I want you to bring the outfit to the hacienda as soon as it's dark. I've a hunch Farnum can be whipped from there."

"There is one thing, Senor—"

"Yeah, Hawk?"

"Many riders passed through the malpais today, traveling west," said the Yaqui. "Single riders, some in pairs, others in small bunches. They traveled beyond the hills yonder." He pointed toward the rolling sage hills to the west, the Moradas, where bands of sheep grazed. "I counted thirty, Senor. Maybe there were others."

"What sort of riders?"

"Mexicans, Senor. Vaqueros," Blue Hawk replied. "The Maldonado brand is a Circle M. The marks on these riders' horses were other brands. Two halted at a stream to water their mounts and to smoke. I crept close. They talked of a big range war, Senor."

Morgan frowned, puzzled, wondering if Clayton Farnum had hired the vaqueros of some neighboring ranchos to side him—and to attack Maldonado Rancho from the west while his men attacked from the east. It seemed likely enough, for after all Farnum planned to seize the entire Maldonado range. Morgan knew that it was time to get back to the hacienda.

HE RODE in at sundown, leading Hernandez's horse with the dead vaquero tied across the saddle. As he approached the casa, Morgan saw a big bunch—about forty—horsemen leave the corrals and head south at a lope. Arturo O'Reilly rode in the lead, sober now, erect in the saddle of his palomino.

Walt Owens came from the gate in the adobe wall surrounding the big ranchhouse, hurried to meet Morgan when he saw the dead vaquero. Two men came running from the corrals, crying out in Spanish at sight of Hernandez's body. Owens asked, "What happened, Morgan?"

"Farnum's gunslicks," Morgan said tersely. "They were gunning for me. They must have trailed us out from town. They got Hernandez."

"They got away?"

"All but two."

"You found no signs of Don Miguel?"

"I found where he was ambushed, nothing more," Morgan said grimly. He saw Conchita come to the gate, and said to the two Mexicans, "Take Hernandez away. It's best if the senorita doesn't see him too close."

He turned the horse with its lifeless burden over to them, then dismounted and walked with Owens to where Conchita stood. She was now wearing a dark green dress with a billowy skirt and a form-fitting bodice. Morgan thought her the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

But the color had faded from her cheeks and she was startlingly pale as she looked after Hernandez's body. Walt Owens hurriedly put his arm about her, drew her inside the gate. Morgan followed. The wall enclosed a wide patio. There was a stone ringed well in the shade of an ancient cottonwood tree. There were carefully tended flower beds. Across the patio was the veranda of the casa, with its arches supporting the upper floor built out over the veranda. Conchita demanded to know what had happened, and Morgan told her briefly.

"But you did not find Don Miguel?"

"I'm sorry," Morgan said.

"I keep thinking that he may be lying somewhere, alive but helpless," the girl said chokingly. "I—I think I'd be relieved to know for sure that he was dead...not suffering."

There was nothing Morgan or Owens

could say to that.

After an uneasy silence, Morgan asked where Arturo and the vaqueros had gone. And Owens said, "When he sobered up, Arturo was all broken up about Don Miguel. He decided to lead another search for him. He headed the band south because it's known that some rustlers hole up in a canyon down that way."

Morgan nodded, pleased that Arturo was showing a decent streak. He said, "I talked to my partner after the fight with Lestrade and his compadres. Blue Hawk tells me that a large number of riders trailed through the malpais during the day—headed for the country west of Moradas. He heard a couple of them talking about taking part in a range war. I'm wondering if Farnum might have brought them in—as gunmen. They were vaqueros from other ranchos."

Owens looked uncertain.

Conchita shook her head. "That can't be," she said. "None of the Mexicans in these parts would fight against Maldonado Rancho." She suddenly looked bewildered. "It's strange. The range west of the Moradas is owned by old Jose Ortega, who was once a comanchero, and Jose is now something of a hermit. I didn't think that he would permit outside riders on his range."

Morgan dropped the subject.

He didn't want to cause the girl more worry, so kept to himself his plan to stand watch over Maldonado Rancho tonight. A man who had once been a comanchero, Morgan knew, was not to be trusted. A comanchero—a trader in contraband with the Comanche Indians, guns and whiskey for stolen cattle and horses—might retire but he wouldn't reform!

CHAPTER XIII

The Law Catches Up

CONCHITA might be worried to distraction and close to heartbreak with grief, but she knew that Morgan had missed supper and now insisted that he come to the kitchen and eat. It was an enormous room where the cooking was done at a huge fireplace and the baking in a great stone oven. The cocinera was a buxom woman; her helper was a pretty girl with flirtatious eyes. They were more than willing to serve a late meal, and Morgan's supper was appetizing and ample.

Walt Owens had come along. He stayed and lit a cigarette, but Conchita excused herself and went to another part of the house. Morgan was glad for the chance to talk to Owens alone, and he said, "I don't like the way things are working out, Walt."

"I'm plenty worried," Owens replied. "But what's bothering you?"

"Arturo taking the vaqueros away."

"You think he's playing Farnum's game?"

"The vaqueros are the rancho's only real fighting men," Morgan said flatly. "The farmhands, sheepherders and other workers aren't the same kind of men. If Farnum should try to seize the hacienda tonight, he'd not have much trouble. You and I and the peons couldn't stop his crowd. Maybe Arturo has had a change of heart, but I doubt it. And I don't like this business of strange vaqueros gathering west of the Moradas. If Farnum made a deal with that old comanchero, Ortega, he'd really have Maldonado Rancho caught in a trap."

"What can we do?" Owens asked worriedly.

"Not much," Morgan replied. "With Don Miguel missing, Arturo a renegade, and Conchita only a girl. We haven't a chance of winning a showdown fight. But there's one hope."

"What's that?"

"The missing land grant paper."

"You mean—?"

"Conchita's got to find it," Morgan said grimly. "It must be hidden somewhere in the casa. Don Miguel probably put it and other valuable documents in some safe place and forgot where."

Owens shook his head. "Conchita told me that Don Miguel never handled the rancho's business affairs. He was just a handsome Irish-American adventurer who took the fancy of a Maldonado woman—Dona Luisa, Conchita's grandmother. Dona Luisa had a head on her, even though she was romantic enough to marry a gringo, and she always took care of the rancho's business. When she died, her and Don Miguel's son, who died in a train

wreck in California five years ago, with his wife, handled all the Maldonado's affairs. After her father's death, Conchita took over. She never saw the land grant paper after the death of her father, Don Esteban."

"Still, it must be hidden here in the casa," Morgan said. "You have Conchita hunt for it, Walt."

"She's too upset about Don Miguel," Owens said. "Besides, I'm an outsider. I've no right to tell Conchita what to do."

"You're in love with her. That gives you certain rights."

"She doesn't know it," Owens said, flushing. "I'm just a poor nester-rancher, and she's a Maldonado. I never forget that."

Morgan smiled. "Don't be a chump, Walt," he said. "Keep remembering that Don Miguel was once plain Mike O'Reilly, a penniless adventurer, and that he married a Maldonado."

Owens apparently had given that no thought, for now he looked surprised. After a moment he grinned, and said, "I'll go have a talk with Conchita."

Alone now except for the two Mexican servants, Wayne Morgan smiled with amusement. It was the first time he'd ever played cupid. But he sobered immediately, finished his supper, rose from the table. He thanked the cocinera, told her it had been a meal that hit the spot, and went out with both the cook and her more youthful helper looking after his tall figure with something like admiration.

He paused in the patio to make and light a cigarette, then went through the gate in the high adobe wall. His roan horse was standing ground-hitched close by, and he crossed and caught up its reins. He swung up, hit the saddle, and a voice reached out of the darkness and struck him like a fist.

"Don't move a hair, Morgan!" the voice ordered. "You're covered!"

MORGAN lifted his hands shoulder high, then froze in that position. He said, "Who're you?" as a rider came up behind him. The rider said, "Matt Brandt, deputy United States marshal."

Wayne Morgan felt a stab of alarm. He had nothing to fear as Wayne Morgan, the drifter, but there was always the chance that some lawman would somehow find some evidence that he had another identity. And the Masked Rider had run afoul of so many peace officers that lawmen everywhere were eager to clamp handcuffs upon him. The Masked Rider would be a prize capture for a bounty-hunting badge-toter. This Brandt now circled about, reined in facing Morgan. He was a burly man; his face was broad and rocky. A heavy mustache adorned his upper lip. He had Morgan covered with a cocked six-gun.

He said flatly, "You can put your hands down, mister. But don't take a notion to go for your guns. I'm an old hand at this game."

Morgan lowered his hands. "What do you want with me, Marshal?"

"Some straight answers."

"That's little enough."

"Yeah—providing you're an honest man."

Morgan turned on a disarming grin, and drawled, "Being honest keeps a lot of men poor, and right now I'm about stony-broke. But the law's got nothing on me. In fact, Marshal, I've got lawmen for friends. Right here in my shirt pocket are letters vouching for my character—one signed by Jim Hatfield of the Texas Rangers and one signed by Steve Reese of the Cattlemen's Protective Association. You want to see them?"

"I'll take your word for that," Matt Brandt said. "I'm not so much interested in your lawmen friends as your outlaw friends. I hear that you and that Masked Rider hombre are thicker than thieves."

"Now, Marshal," Morgan drawled, "where'd you hear such a loco thing?"

"In Santa Rosita."

"From what loose-tongued talker?"

"From Clayton Farnum, head of the Southwest Land Development Company," Brandt replied. "I was sent to these parts because the U. S. Marshal's office had word that Farnum was going to have trouble clearing his land of squatters. I had a talk with Farnum this afternoon, soon as I reached Santa Rosita, and he told me that the Masked Rider was stirring up trouble. He claims the Masked Rider started a prairie fire that burned out the squatters, so they'd blame him."

Morgan swore softly.

So Clayton Farnum had even enlisted the law on his side. The man never passed up an angle.

Brandt went on, "I'd give an arm to catch the Masked Rider, Morgan. I want him bad, like a lot of lawmen. Farnum has an idea that you're friendly with the Masked Rider, and Farnum's man, Lestrade, is sure of it. I'm a reasonable man, and I'm going to give you a break. You lead me to this Masked Rider's hideout and I'll let you go scot-free."

"Marshal, you're as wrong as wrong can be."

"I've got a hunch that I'm not," Brandt said, his voice turning harsh. "It's strong enough for me to place you under arrest."

Morgan frowned.

He was up against a stubborn man who would arrest him as a suspicious character for lack of any other charge. Brandt would have to turn him loose eventually, but in the meantime, Clayton Farnum would have a clear field here upon Maldonado Rancho. Unwittingly, Brandt was playing Farnum's crooked game. Farnum hoped the the lawman would succeed where Jake Lestrade had failed in getting rid of Wayne Morgan. There was no use arguing with Matt Brandt. Argument never swayed a stubborn man.

Morgan was the picture of a cowhand entangled with the law. He sagged in the saddle. His voice was unhappy. "All right, Marshal," he muttered. "I'll take your word for it that you'll let me off. I ran into the Masked Rider up in the Brenoso Hills. I know where he's camped now."

"Lead the way," Brandt said, excitement in his voice. 'But remember, no tricks!"

"Sure," mumbled Wayne Morgan. "No tricks."

He started out, walking his roan.

Matt Brandt rode close behind him, cocked gun still in his hand.

CHAPTER XIV

Lawman Out of Luck

PERHAPS they'd ridden two miles north across Maldonado range when Morgan saw a pin-point of light ahead. Brandt soon saw it, too, and grunted, "What's that light?" Morgan replied, "Campfire."

"The Masked Rider's?"

"Yeah."

"Keep riding toward it. Better give me your guns first, though."

Morgan unbuckled his gunbelts, and Brandt swung alongside to take them. Brandt thrust the twin rigs into his saddle pockets, then took Morgan's rifle. He then asked if Morgan and the Masked Rider had some sort of signal they used to identify each other.

"Yeah," Morgan said. "I've got to whistle in a certain way."

That was truthful enough, though not as Brandt would have had it. When there was no danger Morgan and Blue Hawk signaled each other with the cry of a mountain lion. When there was danger, they used a code-like whistle. Morgan meant to give Blue Hawk the warning signal, once he was close enough to the camp.

Brandt said, "We'll round him up now." His voice had a trace of nervousness in it. Obviously he was well aware of the Masked Rider's reputation. He added, "String along with me, Morgan, and I'll see that you get a cut of the reward money I collect for this hombre."

"Your word on that?"

"Sure," Brandt growled. "Let's go."

They rode on, and when close to the campfire, Morgan sounded his whistle. An answering whistle returned to him. Blue Hawk was alert. Morgan rode directly toward the fire, and Brandt kept close behind him. There seemed to be a man bedded down on the far side of the campfire. Brandt motioned Morgan to dismount, then he swung down. Brandt started forward, yelling, "All right, hombre! Come out of those blankets—reaching!"

No man came from the blankets. Blue Hawk had rigged a dummy of a bedroll, and now, as Brandt realized that he'd been tricked, the Yaqui appeared from the darkness beyond the campfire's glow. He moved silently as a shadow on his moccasins, passing Morgan, and catching Brandt from behind. One arm went around the lawman's throat, the other pressed a knife-point against his back. Brandt uttered a startled yelp.

"You move, hombre, you die!"

Morgan said hastily, "Don't kill him, Hawk. He's a lawman."

He crowded in, took Brandt's gun.

Blue Hawk then released the lawman,

who muttered sheepishly, "So you played me for a fool, Morgan? I won't forget that!"

Morgan said, "Fetch the rope off his saddle, amigo. We'll tie him up so he can have a nice long visit here—while we high-tail it."

They left Matt Brandt securely trussed up, knowing that some of the Maldonado vaqueros would find and release him when morning came. They rode off a short distance, then Morgan changed into the Masked Rider's accoutrements and, leaving Blue Hawk, rode through the darkness on Midnight. He found the road that led east from Maldonado Rancho headquarters toward Santa Rosita, followed it at an easy lope. He had traveled only a couple of miles when he heard the drumming of many hoofs.

He took cover in some brush at the side of the road, and waited.

It was the Farnum crowd, as he had expected.

Clayton Farnum and Jake Lestrade were in the lead, and behind them rode, in pairs, a big bunch of horsemen. They passed so close to the Masked Rider's hiding-place that he could have dropped the loop of his lariat over any one of them. He didn't bother to tally the bunch, but estimated that Farnum had about forty gunmen with him.

The Masked Rider was not surprised.

He had expected Farnum to force a showdown after having a scare thrown into him by Wayne Morgan and by the presence of the Masked Rider upon Maldonado range. But he had to admire, in grudging fashion, how well Farnum paved the way for the showdown. He'd baited Arturo O'Reilly into getting the Maldonado vaqueros out of the way. When they returned they would find their headquarters held by the enemy, which would knock the fight out of them.

If the vaqueros didn't accept the defeat, Farnum had enough toughs with him to handle them, as well as the vaqueros, the Masked Rider was certain, waiting across the Moradas on the range of the ex-comanchero, Jose Ortega. And Farnum had tried to make sure that Wayne Morgan and the Masked Rider, whom he believed to be two separate men, would be kept of the showdown by turning that lawman onto them.

But the Masked Rider was unhampered by any lawman.

When the Farnum crew was past, he left his hiding-place and headed away from the road and across the range. He had to reach the hacienda ahead of the invaders. He didn't want them to seize and hold as hostage the one person who would always fight for Maldonado Rancho —the girl Conchita!

ONCE he had circled wide about the slow-moving Farnum crowd, the Masked Rider let the black stallion run. Midnight was, as his name suggested, a good night horse and never faltered no matter how thick the darkness. The lights of the big adobe casa and of the village soon appeared, and shortly the Masked Rider galloped into the ranch headquarters. He called out resoundingly, "Hello, the house!" His voice now held none of the lazy drawl peculiar to Wayne Morgan. It was vibrant, rousing—an alarum.

He ducked low in the saddle and rode directly into the patio, and Conchita and Walt Owens came hurrying from the house. Behind them came a couple servants who cried out in fright at sight of the black-clad horseman. Conchita grasped Owen's arm, gasped, "Who—who is it?"

"A friend," Owens said. "Don't be frightened." He hurried forward. "What's wrong?" he demanded of the Masked Rider.

"Farnum's on his way here to seize Maldonado Rancho headquarters."

"He wouldn't dare!" Conchita cried. "Our vaqueros will fight!"

"Your vaqueros are miles from here, Senorita," said the Masked Rider. He doffed his peaked, jet-black Stetson, and bowed gracefully. "Trust me," he urged. "I've experience with such men as Clayton Farnum. They're ruthless. They'll stop at nothing. You're not safe here. You've got to leave."

"No, I can't!" the girl said huskily. "It—it's my home."

"Listen," the Masked Rider said sharply.

The night was still, very quiet, but by listening intently they could hear in the distance the drumming of many shod hoofs. It was like the sound of war drums. The girl looked at the Masked Rider with frightened eyes, and said, "I'll go. If you

think it's best, I'll go."

She ran into the house for clothes more suitable for night riding, and Walt Owens hurried to saddle mounts. The Masked Rider rode from the patio. He could not yet see the oncoming horsemen, but the drumming of hoofs grew steadily louder. Farnum was bringing his gunfighters on at a lope. Now that he had made his boldest move and was soon within sight of his final goal, the man was evidently impatient.

There was little time left.

The Masked Rider drew the rifle from his saddleboot. He said brusquely, as Owens came running up with two horses, "Ride out as fast as you can. Keep the girl safe. Head north. Farnum won't expect you to high-tail it in that direction."

He could see the horsemen now, as the moon slid from behind the clouds and drenched the range with a chill light. Conchita came from the casa, clad now in riding clothes. She and Owens mounted, and Conchita called, as they turned away, "You'll come with us, Masked Rider?"

The Masked Rider didn't answer.

He turned Midnight about and rode to toll the Farnum crowd away from the fleeing couple. He was only an elusive shadow—until his rifle spurted powder-flame. He was seen then, and Clayton Farnum barked an order. It was Jake Lestrade who yelled, "It's the Masked Rider! Gun him down!" Lestrade kept yelling it, like a crazy man. "Gun him down! Gun him down!"

Lawmen like Matt Brandt might want the Masked Rider badly.

But not nearly so badly as outlaws like Jake Lestrade wanted him!

The night racketed with gunfire.

THEY fired wildly at the Masked Rider, but only a half-dozen continued the pursuit after the first minute or two. Clayton Farnum was not to be baited away from his goal by a solitary rider, even if that rider was the legendary Robin Hood of the West. He turned the bulk of his gunfighters back toward the ranch headquarters, letting those six riders attempt to run the Masked Rider down.

It was a simple matter for the black-shrouded horseman to elude his handful of pursuers, however. He was far better mounted. His mount and costume blended perfectly with the darkness, which returned as the moon was again smudged out by clouds. He gave them the slip, then rode easily back toward Maldonado headquarters. He reined in upon a rise overlooking the headquarters, and saw and heard Farnum and his gunhands methodically taking over the keystone of the great Maldonado Rancho. The peons were being brought from their 'dobes and searched for arms. They were being given blunt orders not to cause trouble. There was an occasional burst of shots as some peon resisted.

The Masked Rider was gripped by rage as he watched from the darkness. Some men might have said he should not concern himself. They might have pointed out that he had nothing to lose and that these people meant nothing to him. But the Masked Rider was forever risking his life for those people who were oppressed, and that he was now helpless to protect these peons and Conchita O'Reilly infuriated him.

He realized that Farnum's death would end the trouble, and he would have wel-

[*Turn page*]

196 PAGES OF EXCITING RANGELAND CLASSICS!

Featuring THE TEXAS RANGERS, a full-length novel by JACKSON COLE; plus novelets and stories by A. LESLIE, RAY NAFZIGER, T. W. FORD, ALLAN R. BOSWORTH and others!

TOP WESTERN FICTION ANNUAL

NOW ON SALE—A BIG QUARTER'S WORTH! GET YOUR COPY TODAY!

comed the chance to face the man over blazing guns. But it was now impossible to get to the range thief. Farnum would never again allow himself to be caught by gunfighters unprotected.

No longer wanting to watch the fall of Maldonado Rancho into alien hands, the Masked Rider turned away. He circled the headquarters, headed Midnight north across the range. When he arrived at the spot where Matt Brandt had been tied up, the campfire was burned down to a bed of embers. The deputy marshal was still securely bound. Lying there on the ground, Brandt stopped struggling against his bonds to stare at the black-clad horseman. Though at the Masked Rider's mercy, Matt Brandt showed no fear. He said thickly, "I'll get you hombre. I'll track you down—if it's the last thing I do. You and Morgan and that Indian!"

"You hear that shooting a few minutes ago, Marshal?"

"Yeah. What have you been up to?"

"I was trying to stop Clayton Farnum from seizing Maldonado Rancho."

"You've got no right to meddle in that business."

"Somebody has to meddle," the Masked Rider said flatly. "If the law is blind, it's up to me. Farnum has gone too far, Brandt."

Brandt denied that. He said sourly, "The Territorial Court upheld his claim to the best part of the Maldonado range when it handed down a decision that Walt Owens was a squatter. That means everybody on the land covered by the Gonzales land grant, which Farnum owns, is a squatter. All those nester-ranchers were squatters. So is the Maldonado family. One of Farnum's lawyers arrived in Santa Rosita today with a writ of ejectment for Don Miguel O'Reilly. Farnum had a right to serve it on old Don Miguel. Maybe it's not fair, but it's the law—the Court's decision. It's got to be abided by."

The Masked Rider didn't argue the point.

He might have told Brandt that his own brand of justice was much more fair than legal justice sometimes was. But he merely said, "Farnum overstepped himself by not waiting for the Maldonado y O'Reilly family to resort to the courts. If the Maldonado title from the Spanish Crown is found, the Gonzales land grant will be worthless. It's a question of whether a Mexican governor had a right to grant Maldonado land to General Gonzales. And Farnum knows that. He's made this move in an attempt to keep the Maldonado title from being found."

"He's got the legal right to eject the O'Reillys, I tell you."

"Did he have the legal right to have Don Miguel bushwhacked?"

"What?" Brandt said, taken aback. "What's that?"

The Masked Rider told him that Don Miguel had been missing since his horse had returned with a blood-stained saddle. He added, "According to the law, there's no murder if no body is found. Even if Don Miguel's body is found, there'll be no way of proving that Farnum had the old haciendado murdered. But I know Farnum is guilty—just as he's guilty of having had his men raid the Harmon ranch and set that grass fire. Maybe I can't argue you into taking sides against Farnum, but I'm serving notice on you, Brandt, that I'm going to do my best to stop him!"

"One more thing for the law to pin on you, hombre."

"I'll risk it," the Masked Rider said, and turned away.

WALT Owens stood with his arm about Conchita O'Reilly. The young rancher was trying to comfort the distraught girl. Wayne Morgan found them several miles north of the rancho headquarters. He reined in his roan horse, drawled, "You do what I asked, Walt?"

Owens nodded. "I got Conchita to hunt for the land grant paper," he said. "She couldn't find it. We were interrupted by the Masked Rider. He warned us that the Farnum crowd was coming to take over the hacienda. I got Conchita away just in time. We heard shooting as we rode out and—"

Conchita broke in, "We're worried, Wayne. We think the Masked Rider was killed."

Morgan had rolled a cigarette. He lighted it now, and the flare of the match showed not worry for the Masked Rider but a trace of amusement. It always amused him to find that people—decent people—were taken by his other self. They paid little attention to Wayne Morgan the drifter, but took the Masked

Rider right into their hearts. Too, more than one young woman of romantic inclination had been fascinated by the Robin Hood outlaw. And it seemed that Conchita was one of his victims. Walt Owens suspected it, too, and he said, his voice rough with jealousy, "I keep telling her that he's all right."

"Sure," Morgan drawled. "Don't worry about the Masked Rider."

He puffed thoughtfully at his cigarette, then said, "Conchita, we've good reason to think that your grandfather is dead. We know that your brother has thrown in with Farnum. That leaves only you of the family to hold out against this crowd —and fight Farnum in the courts if the Maldonado title is ever found. He knows that you're a threat to him, and he'll now try to find you. You've got to go in hiding."

"I understand," Conchita said huskily. "But where shall I hide?"

"You must have friends who'll take you in."

"I have some very good friends in Las Vegas."

"You'll let Walt take you there?"

Conchita considered a moment, then proved herself as spunky as Morgan had judged her. "I won't go so far from Maldonado Rancho," she said determinedly. "I want to stay nearby, so that I can fight. When the vaqueros find out that Arturo—" her voice broke over her brother's name, and pain showed in her eyes— "that Arturo tricked them, they'll come to me. I'll have to be their leader. And maybe with the Masked Rider's help—"

"What about Morgan and me?" Walt Owens demanded sulkily.

Conchita touched his arm. "I'm sorry, Walt," she said contritely. "I do appreciate you two standing by me. I hope you'll not desert me."

Morgan broke in, "Where will you go into hiding? A girl can't just drift around like a man. And Farnum is sure to have his tough hunt for you."

Conchita said without hesitation, "I'll go to old Jose Ortega."

Owens gave Morgan a startled look, and Morgan, plucking the cigarette from his lips, said, "I don't like it. Ortega is an old comanchero, and he's sure to be a tricky hombre. I'm not forgetting those riders heading for his range. I'd bet that Farnum and Ortega have a deal on."

Conchita might be full of grief and worry, but she managed to smile. "You'd lose that bet," she said. "I often rode across the Moradas to visit Senor Ortega. Once I found him ill, with no one to care for him. I nursed him for three days. He's my friend, and I'm going to him."

Morgan saw that her mind was made up.

He said, "All right. But Walt and I will go with you. We'll see for ourselves what this comanchero is up to."

CHAPTER XV

Conchita and the Comanchero

BREATHLESSLY Conchita said, "There! There's Senor Ortega's rancho!"

It was midnight, and the three of them had been riding hard. Many miles lay between the Maldonado Rancho headquarters and Jose Ortega's place. The horses were blowing. Wayne Morgan and Walt Owens reined in beside the girl, peered in the direction she pointed. Through the timber upon the hill, they saw several lights. The lighted windows of a ranchhouse and the glow of several campfires. The girl saw nothing suspicious in this, but Morgan wondered what kept candles or lamps, whatever illuminated Ortega's casa, and campfires burning until midnight. Certainly some activity was being planned here at this lonely place beyond the Morada Hills.

Conchita said, "Come. Let's go down."

The two men followed her through the timber, down the slope. They heard voices now, loud talk and hearty laughter, and the strumming of a guitar. They caught the mouth-watering smell of roasting meat. Evidently, a beef or two was being barbecued. Shadowy figures moved to and fro before the fires, and, as Morgan and his companions drew close, he saw that the vaqueros gathered there held gourds or earthern cups from which they drank. Wine and tequila were flowing freely. There were women too, dark-eyed Mexican women, and now Morgan wondered if this wasn't nothing more than a gathering of vaqueros for a fiesta. It certainly

seemed like some sort of shindig.

Conchita called out, *"Hola, Senor Ortega!"*

A gaunt figure by one of the fires turned, peered at the three riders, and exclaimed, *"Hola, muchacha!"* He came forward, a man with such a seamed and wrinkled face that he seemed, to Wayne Morgan, a thousand years old. He was dressed in the old fashion; he wore a fine black sombrero, an embroidered chaqueta, laced calzoneras or trousers, a scarlet sash, boots of embossed leather. He moved with an odd, springy gait that belied his great age. There was youth too in his beady black eyes. They were wily eyes, *El Diablo's* cunning in them. A huge beak of a nose jutted from his craggy face. His traplike mouth wore a grin. A straggly gray mustache drooped down past the corners of the grin. He doffed his sombrero, bowed low, for all the world like a fine caballero. This then was Jose Ortega, one of the last of the vanishing dealers in contraband—the comancheros.

Dangerous?

Wayne Morgan did not know.

He glanced at the celebrating crowd around the high-blazing fires. There were at least forty vaqueros here with Ortega, and vaqueros, Morgan well knew, were like the American cowboys—fighting men. Walt Owens looked uneasy. But Conchita, hastily dismounting, was unafraid. She and the old man embraced. They spoke such rapid Spanish that Morgan did not understand.

But he saw Conchita stiffen, shrink away from Ortega.

Morgan was down from the saddle then, alert. "What's wrong?" he demanded. The girl whirled, her face not frightened but aglow. "Nothing," she said. "Nothing is wrong! Everything is all right. Don Miguel is here!"

JOSE ORTEGA'S house was low and rambling. It was of adobe, with a viga-pole roof. Like the Maldonado casa, it had a walled patio onto which the various rooms of the house opened. The old comanchero led Conchita to one of these rooms, and Morgan and Owens followed. The room was furnished in the sparse Mexican fashion, lighted by candles, and an old man, though not nearly so old as Ortega, lay in the bed.

Michael O'Reilly who had come to be Don Miguel Maldonado y O'Reilly was perhaps seventy years old. He had a mane of hair and a handsome beard iron-gray in color. His eyes were blue. His face was haggard, a chalky white. He looked like a man who had been hale and hearty until stricken by a grave illness. Don Miguel's wound had been a serious one, but Jose Ortega had kept him alive and given him good care.

Don Miguel's eyes lighted at sight of Conchita. He smiled faintly, and his voice was very weak. "You worried, *nieta mia?*"

Conchita knelt at the bedside, took one of the old man's hands between her own. It was a touching sight. These two loved each other.

Between them, Don Miguel haltingly and Jose Ortega in an admixture of Spanish and English, they explained what had happened. The two old men often kept a rendezvous after sundown at the halfway point between their two ranch headquarters. They'd talk of old times, smoke their pipes, drink a little vino brought along by Ortega. An hour or two of friendliness at twilight, in the twilight of their lives, for two old men.

They were to meet the night Don Miguel had been ambushed. Don Miguel had heard the crack of the rifle, felt the slug tear into him. He had managed to remain in the saddle, and flee. He had ridden several miles toward the Moradas before losing consciousness.

Jose Ortega had come upon his unconscious friend, sprawled upon the ground. Don Miguel's horse had run off, so Ortega had dismounted and, with great effort, lifted the wounded man onto his own horse. Fearing that the bushwhackers might be still nearby, Ortega had decided that it would be safest to take Don Miguel to his rancho. He had sent no word to Madonado Rancho because, wily in the way of a comanchero, he had thought it best to let Don Miguel's enemies believe they had succeeded in killing their victim, even though it would cause much grief at Madonado Rancho.

Don Miguel was sure that the bushwhackers had been Farnum men, for he knew that Clayton Farnum would stop at nothing to gain control of Maldonado Rancho. Jose Ortega had offered to help

him. The old comanchero had sent a rider out to the neighboring ranchos to ask for help, and the vaqueros now gathered here were going to join the Maldonado vaqueros in defending their range.

"Tomorrow," Ortego said, "we ride to Maldonado Rancho."

"It's too late," Wayne Morgan said. "Farnum has seized the rancho headquarters."

"We'll drive them out," old Jose Ortega said. "We've men enough."

"We haven't a chance," Morgan told him. "Farnum has plenty of gunfighters. He'll fort up in the casa. He has the law on his side, for he has a writ of ejectment for Don Miguel. There's a deputy United States marshal on Maldonado range, and he'll back Farnum. It'd be a bloody fight, Ortega, one that we couldn't win."

DON MIGUEL levered himself up on his elbows. "You mean that I've lost Maldonado Rancho?" he demanded. Weak though he was, the old haciendado was angry. "I don't care for myself. I'm old. I've not long to live. But the rancho really belongs to Conchita and Arturo—yes, to Arturo, even though he's a worthless scamp. Dammit; I won't give it up!" He paused, breathing hard. His face was beaded with sweat. "Ortega, we'll fight!" he said, finding strength enough to shout. "We'll fight, and we'll show that range-stealing tinhorn and his renegades! You take me out and tie me on a horse! You hear, Ortega!"

Conchita cried, "No, Don Miguel! No!"

She forced him to lie back upon his pillow. That he submitted showed how weak the old rannihan was. He lay there mumbling to himself, cursing the luck that kept him helpless at such a time.

Morgan said, "Don Miguel, there's only one way to whip Clayton Farnum. That's by proving up on your claim to Maldonado Rancho and by getting the Territorial Court to decide that the Gonzales land grant that Farnum holds doesn't void the Maldonado title. To do that, you've got to find the Maldonado grant."

Don Miguel groaned. "It's lost, son! It's been lost for years!"

"When did you see it last?"

"A dozen years ago. Before my wife, Dona Luisa, died."

"She took care of the Rancho's papers?"

"Yes. It was really her property, she being a true Maldonado."

"She must have had a safe hiding-place for those papers."

Don Miguel rolled his head from side to side on the pillow. He didn't know where Dona Luisa had kept the title from the Spanish Crown. He had searched the room used as an *ofico* many times. There were many papers in the office, but not the land grant paper. The old man began to look desperate. Conchita looked as though she wanted to cry. Old Jose Ortega kept muttering that they must fight.

Morgan had a sudden idea. "Look; did Dona Luisa have a maidservant?"

It was Conchita who caught his thought, and cried, "Yes! Old Maria de Baca! She was very close to my grandmother. She might know!"

"Where is she now?"

"She lives in the village with her son and his family," Conchita said excitedly. "I'll return to the hacienda and talk to her."

"No," Walt Owens said. "It's too risky."

"But—"

"Walt's right," Wayne Morgan broke in. "This is a job for a man." He gave Conchita a quick grin. "A job for the Masked Rider. I'll ride back to Maldonado range and tell him about the servant. He'll get to her—right under the noses of Farnum's gunhands!"

CHAPTER XVI

Bad Hands on the Maldonado

LATER by an hour and a half, Morgan slowed his blowing mount to a walk. He was within half a mile of the Maldonado headquarters. He could see the lighted windows of the casa, but the adobe huts in the village were dark. He rode on warily, heading toward the clump of cottonwoods along the stream that curved around the headquarters. Morgan had told Blue Hawk to take up a position among the trees, so that he could keep watch on the Farnum crowd, and he hoped to find him there now.

He uttered the cry of a mountain lion, pitching it low, and after a moment he

heard it echoed even more cautiously.

Morgan dismounted, led the roan into the trees. It was very dark here, and he saw nothing of the Yaqui. Then a furtive sound reached him. He turned, peered about, saw a moving shadow. He sensed danger too late. A bulky figure launched itself at him. A gun-barrel crashed against his left temple. Pain exploded in him. His brain reeled, his knees buckled. His attacker bore him to the ground. He tried to fight back, but he was dazed and partially blinded. Powerful hands caught hold of his arms. He felt the chill of metal upon his wrists. Handcuffs snapped shut.

A voice growled, "That does it!"

Matt Brandt's voice.

The deputy marshal pulled Morgan to his feet. He was rought about it, remembering how the drifter and his Indian companion had jumped him and trussed him up. Brandt had worked at his bonds until freeing himself. He'd prowled through the darkness in an attempt to find Morgan and the Yaqui. He'd come finally to the cottonwood clump and flushed Blue Hawk from his hiding-place there. Brandt hadn't been able to lay his hands upon the Indian, but he'd waited and upon hearing the mountain lion call, he'd guessed its significance—and answered it.

After the lawman had taunted Morgan with his explanation, he said, "You're under arrest for assaulting an officer. Maybe I can find some more charges to book you on before I get you to jail. Such as being the Masked Rider's partner."

"You'll never prove that, Brandt."

"Time'll tell. Come along."

"Where are you taking me?"

"You'll find out," Brandt growled.

He took Morgan across the stream and over to the Maldonado casa. They were challenged and stopped by two of Farnum's men doing sentry duty, then were permitted to go on. They passed through the patio, entered a wide room where Clayton Farnum was going through the papers he had found in the drawers of a desk. Jake Lestrade was rummaging through a cabinet. A couple of the hardcases stood by the door, smoking cigarettes. The search for the missing Maldonado grant halted upon the entrance of Brandt and his prisoner.

Farnum said sourly, "So you finally got one of them, Marshal."

"And I'll get the other one," Brandt replied.

"Morgan's talked?"

"His kind never talk. But I'll track down that Indian."

"The Indian's not important," Farnum said. "Don't waste your time hunting him. Get the Masked Rider." He took a cigar from his pocket, bit off its end, all the while studying Morgan. "It'd be worth your while to tell us where the Masked Rider holes up, Morgan."

MORGAN GRINNED mirthlessly. "You're in a bad humor, Mister Farnum. Looks as though you can't find what you're hunting." He glanced at the burly Matt Brandt. "What right has he got to go through the Maldonado papers?"

Brandt shrugged. "He's got a writ of ejectment," he said flatly. "It gives him the right to dispossess the Maldonado family—and what they've left behind is no doubt his. The court is behind him."

Lestrade came forward, a wicked look in his eyes. He said, "I can make this hombre talk. Better squeal, Morgan, before you get hurt. Where's the Masked Rider?"

"How should I know?"

"Maybe," said Lestrade, "this'll make you remember."

He smashed his fist into Morgan's face.

Morgan's head rocked back, but he didn't fall. He recovered, lifted his manacled hands, and lashed out. The handcuffs ripped across Lestrade's face. The hardcase howled with pain and staggered away, grabbing for his gun. Brandt drew his weapon, stepped forward, covered Lestrade.

"This man's my prisoner," he said ominously. "That means he's under my protection. Keep your hands off him, Lestrade." He gave Farnum a scowling look. "Maybe you've managed to get the backing of the Territorial Court, but I sure don't like the kind of men you've got on your payroll. I'll string along with you only so far, friend. Once you over-step the law, I'll turn against you. You savvy?"

He didn't wait for a reply.

He turned, motioned Morgan toward the door.

They left the casa, walked toward the outbuildings. There was a harness-shed

near the corrals. It had no windows, its walls were of thick abode, and the door could be secured on the outside. Brandt removed Morgan's handcuffs, shoved him into the shed, closed and fastened the door, and went away.

Morgan struck a match and looked around. The shed was full of harness and gear and old saddles. He couldn't see any sort of tool he could use to pry open the shed's heavy door. He let the match burn out, and the darkness was inky black. Morgan tested the door with his weight, but it didn't give at all. He heard bootsteps pass the shed, and guessed that one of Farnum's hardcases was on patrol outside. Some time later, he heard a big bunch of riders clatter up to the corrals. And Lestrade's voice bellowed, "All right, you hombres! Throw up your hands! You're covered and you're surrounded!"

Morgan knew that the Maldonado vaqueros had come in from the search, the wild goose chase upon which Arturo O'Reilly had led them. They'd ridden into a trap, and now Farnum's men were disarming them. Yes, with his ear to the door, Morgan heard Arturo say sharply, "Do as you're told! Give up your guns!"

There was no shooting.

The treacherous youth was having his way.

Silence came shortly. The vaqueros were allowed to off-saddle their mounts and go to their huts after being disarmed. Morgan paced to and fro like a caged wild animal. He had never before felt so helpless. Once he leapt to the door to listen again. Voices shouted. A scream rang out. A woman's scream. Then there was silence once more. Time dragged. It seemed to Morgan an eternity since Brandt had locked him in the 'dobe shed. Actually he had been imprisoned only a little more than two hours when a light tapping sounded at the door.

"Blue Hawk?"

"Yes, Senor," came the soft reply. "I come to free you!"

The door had been secured by a chain, and now Morgan heard a slight rattle as the Yaqui worked the chain from its hasp. A moment later the door swung open. Blue Hawk pulled Morgan's guns from his sash; the weapons quickly changed hands. The Indian's eyes glittered in the darkness, and he whispered, "Come, Senor. It is not safe here."

Morgan paused only to close the shed door and reset the chain lock.

He followed Blue Hawk who glided silently as a shadow around the 'dobe. They kept to the shadows of the barns and soon forded the creek to the cover of the cottonwood clump.

Blue Hawk explained, "The lawman got loose and came here. I tried to lead him away, Senor, but he did not follow me far. He returned and you walked into his trap. I was too late getting back to stop it. I found your guns on the ground where Senor Brandt had thrown them. Senor, evil things happen here tonight."

"What did you see, amigo?"

"The vaqueros were disarmed, and warned to make no trouble."

"Farnum wins every hand!" Morgan said bitterly.

"The girl, Senor—these men of evil have seized her."

Morgan gave a start. "Conchita? Here?"

The Yaqui nodded. "She rode in on a done-in horse, Senor. I followed her. She circled around and went to a hut in the village. She talked to an old woman there. Then the senorita crept toward the casa, to enter by the kitchen. Some of those *renegados* caught her. They took her to the room where Senor Farnum waits."

Morgan felt like groaning with despair.

Conchita hadn't been satisfied to trust another person to make the attempt to find the Maldonado land grant paper. She'd given Walt Owens the slip, ridden away from Jose Ortega's place, and now —now was in Farnum's hands. And Farnum would know what use to make of such a hostage! Conchita was too headstrong for her own good!

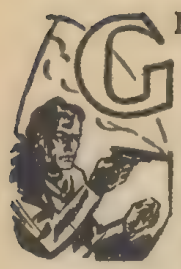
Morgan grasped Blue Hawk's arm. "You can take me to the hut the senorita visited, amigo?"

"Yes, senor," the Yaqui replied. "But the danger is great."

THREE TOP-FLIGHT WESTERN NOVELS IN EVERY ISSUE OF
TRIPLE WESTERN
25c AT ALL STANDS!

CHAPTER XVII

Secret of the Deed



GRAVE-FACED the stolid Yaqui remained behind to hold the horses, his own gray and the great black stallion, and to stand guard. He held a rifle in the crook of his arm. His dark eyes peered one way and another, never idle, and his ears were attuned for any hostile sound.

The black-clad figure of the Masked Rider moved toward the hut Blue Hawk had pointed out.

Once, the Masked Rider sank down and blended with the grass. Two riders, patrolling the peon village, passed at a walk. They carried their rifles across their saddles. Farnum's gunmen were alert even though the Maldonado vaqueros were disarmed and confined to their dobes.

The horsemen past, the Masked Rider rose and went on. He gained the rear of the hut, and close by in the darkness a dog began a wild yelping. The Masked Rider froze. The two sentries came loping back, one growling, "Somebody's around or that dog wouldn't be making a fuss." The pair swung in between the de Baca dobe and its neighbor. The Masked Rider leapt to the de Baca's door, hitting it with his shoulder. It swung open and he stepped inside. As he closed the door, a knife blade was laid against his throat and a voice muttered, "You ladrones have taken my guns, but I still have a knife!"

"Wait, friend!"

"You call me that, hombre!"

The Masked Rider knew that this must be Maria de Baca's son, one of the vaqueros. The man meant to protect his family, and his intention was certainly justifiable. But a little pressure upon the knife and the Masked Rider's throat would be slit. Rigid, hardly breathing, the Masked Rider said low-voiced, "I'm not one of them, de Baca. Maybe you've heard of me—the Masked Rider?"

"You lie, *bandido!*"

"No. When those riders outside leave, you make a light and take a look at me."

"Lights are forbidden. One would bring a shot through the window."

"I come on a mission for Don Miguel."

"Don Miguel is dead."

"No. He is with Jose Ortega. He's wounded, but still alive."

The knife was withdrawn from the Masked Rider's throat, and he breathed more easily. Outside the dog stopped yelping and the two Farnum men rode off. The vaquero whispered, "That is true, Senor. We learned from Dona Conchita, that Don Miguel still lives. She spoke too of the Masked Rider. But I had to be careful with you, hombre. I have my wife and children to think of."

Vastly relieved, the Masked Rider said, "And your mother, eh? It's to see Maria de Baca that I came here. These gunmen have seized the senorita. They caught her before she reached the casa. There's only one chance of saving Maldonado Rancho, amigo, and I've got to make that chance. I've got to know the hiding-place of the title of Maldonado Rancho. I've got to find that paper before Farnum makes Dona Conchita reveal where it's hidden."

"What makes you think my mother knows, Senor?"

"Your mother was Dona Luisa's maid."

"*Si.*"

"Being close to the old lady, she would share her secrets."

"Maybe."

"Your mother told Dona Conchita," the Masked Rider said. "I'm sure of that because the girl went straight to the casa from here, as though she had learned that the document was hidden in the house." He paused, then added as the vaquero was silent, "You can trust me. If I was one of the Farnum crowd, amigo, I'd have come with enough men to force you people to talk."

He saw the vague shape of the man nod. "*Es posible,*" de Baca muttered. "I will trust you. It is a time when someone must be trusted. I will call my mother."

MARIA DE BACA came from another room, a frail little figure in the gloom. Her skirts and petticoats rustled. She came to the Masked Rider, who towered above her, and caught his arm with a trembling hand. She said softly, in her own tongue, "I heard what was said. I trust you, Senor. And I will tell you where the paper is hidden."

"*Gracias, Senora.*"

"There is a chest in Dona Conchita's room."

"So? Which room is that?"

"The one that was Dona Luisa's when she lived."

The Masked Rider controlled his impatience. He would find Conchita's room, somehow. "The paper is in the chest, Senora?"

"*Si.*"

"But Conchita must have looked in it many times."

"There is a secret compartment," the old lady said simply.

The Masked Rider questioned her about the compartment and then asked about the location of the room in which it stood. Finally he patted Senora de Baca's hand, whispered, "*Muchisimas gracias,*" and turned to the door. None of Farnum's men were in sight when he hurried through the darkness to rejoin Blue Hawk, and fortunately the dog did not renew its uproar. He mounted, gestured the Yaqui to follow, and swung away from the village.

Once the Masked Rider drew one of his guns and the Yaqui swung his rifle up. But the four riders who cut across their trail at a lope evidently took them for some of their compadres. The Masked Rider decided that boldness might pan out better than a furtive approach to his next destination—La Casa de Maldonado, itself.

He circled around, Blue Hawk as close as a shadow, and they passed two more prowling Farnum toughs without being challenged. They came to the rear of the casa, reined in at the patio wall. The Masked Rider tossed Midnight's reins to Blue Hawk, whispered, "Wait in the cottonwoods, amigo," and, standing in the stirrups, he heaved himself atop the wall.

It was deftly accomplished.

Blue Hawk went on with the black stallion after but a moment's stop, and the Masked Rider dropped lightly to the ground inside the patio. There were Farnum men on the veranda, some more over by the patio gate. The Masked Rider heard their low voices, saw the glow of their cigarettes. He moved silently toward the kitchen, then halted abruptly. More of the tough crew were in the kitchen, eating at the table. He could see them through the open doorway. He glided to the giant cottonwood by the well, blended his cloaked figure with its gnarled trunk. For a moment he felt thwarted, then he saw how the branches of the tree grew against the house. The foliage screened one of the upper windows. The window stood open and the iron grillwork peculiar to fine casas covered only its lower half. Too, the room behind it was dark.

The Masked Rider caught hold of a lower limb, hauled himself up, and climbed as silently as a cat. He worked his way out on a limb that scraped against the adobe wall, then gripped the grillwork and eased his weight from the tree. A moment later he was inside.

He sensed at once that the room was occupied, and so drew his right-hand gun. He saw a man lying upon the bed, heard the man's heavy breathing. It was Arturo O'Reilly, and suddenly the man woke. Arturo was fully dressed except for hat and coat. He sat up startled, gasped, "Who are you?"

The Masked Rider reached him with three long strides, his gun boring at the frightened youth. "One sound out of you," he said, low-voiced but savagely, "and you die!"

"You—you're the Masked Rider?"

"So men call me."

"What do you want here?" Arturo asked chokingly. He looked as though he would scream any second. "What—what do you want with me?"

"I ought to want to kill you, you no-good son," the Masked Rider retorted, and his anger was not feigned. "For betraying you own family. For selling out your own folks for some gambling debts and a cheap saloon girl in Clayton Farnum's pay. For being friends with the man who had your grandfather bushwhacked and now has your own sister a prisoner!"

Arturo uttered a strangling sound. "Conchita?" he said.

He leapt from the bed.

The Masked Rider didn't know if the youth meant to attack him or to go to his sister's rescue. He struck out. He used his left fist instead of the gun in his right hand, but the blow was powerful enough to spill Arturo to the floor. The Masked Rider holstered his gun, bent over the fallen man. He trussed Arturo up with his own belt and necktie, gagged him

with his own handkerchief, then rose and crossed to the door.

A long hall ran the length of the upper floor, with the doors of a dozen rooms opening off it. It was dimly lighted by a burning candle set in a wall niche opposite the stairs leading from the main floor. Most of the doors stood open, left open no doubt after Farnum and Lestrade had searched for the land grant paper. The room in which the Masked Rider was interested was at the south end of the hall, to the right. He moved quietly along the hall, his long black cape billowing out behind him. His blue eyes glinted through the slits in his domino mask. This door was closed.

He listened at it, heard a sound within.

He pulled a gun, gripped the latch with his left hand.

He drew a sharp breath, flung the door wide, leapt inside.

CHAPTER XVIII

Death in the Dark

DIMLY, the room was lighted by the candles of a three-pronged candelabra. The girl Conchita lay upon the bed. She was bound hand and foot. Her copper-brown hair was dishevelled, and her blouse was torn off one shoulder. There was a nasty bruise on her right cheek just below the eye, that was turning blue. There was a long scratch across her left cheek. Apparently Conchita had fought against the men who had seized her, and in return had been roughly handled. She gazed at the Masked Rider with hope replacing the fear in her eyes, and gasped, "Masked Rider!"

Her voice held more than relief.

The Masked Rider crossed to her, holstering his gun and taking out a knife with which to cut her bonds. When he had freed her, he helped her from the bed. He couldn't help but rebuke her, and said, "You shouldn't have come here. Why didn't you stay at Ortega's rancho?"

Conchita didn't seem to hear.

She gazed at him with glowing eyes, and whispered, "I knew you'd come." It turned into a fierce whisper. "Somehow, I knew you'd come, Masked Rider!"

He said, in a sharp whisper, "We're still in danger. You've got to realize that. They got the title, senorita?"

Conchita said, "No," hurt pride chilling her voice.

"It's still in the chest?"

"Yes, I denied that I knew where it was. Clayton Farnum suspected that I knew and had come back for it. He threatened to turn me over to his men if I don't tell him." Now she looked frightened again. "He'll come here and—"

"Get the title," the Masked Rider ordered.

It was a huge, elaborately carved chest, the work of some expert cabinetmaker, and stood against the foot of the bed. It no doubt held spare bedding and odds and ends of clothing, and certainly had been searched by Farnum or some of his men. It was so heavy that the Masked Rider, powerful though he was, had to strain to move it noiselessly away from the bed so that Conchita could get at its back.

Since Maria de Baca had described the secret panel, Conchita had no difficulty in lifting the back slightly upward in its grooves and then pulling it outward at the bottom. It came away and revealed another panel. There was a space of perhaps an inch between the two, and in that space were hidden half a dozen very old papers. Conchita caught them up which a little cry of victory.

ALL WERE worn and yellow with age, but two were of parchment and so better preserved. Conchita examined each in turn, then said, "This is the Maldonado grant from the Spanish Crown." It was one of the parchments, and the writing upon it, in old Spanish, was faded and barely legible. But it would do. It would save Maldonado Rancho.

Conchita rose from her kneeling position, hugging the documents to her breast. Her eyes were aglow. "We've won out, *amigo mio,*" she said excitedly. "Thanks to you, we'll save Maldonado Rancho!"

"We've still got to get away from here, senorita," the Masked Rider said. "You must get back to Ortega's rancho."

"You'll go with me?"

"Part way, at least."

"Then you carry the papers," Conchita

said. "They'll be safer with you."

The Masked Rider took them rather than waste time arguing with this willful girl. He took her arm, then, and hurried her to the door. He opened it, made sure that the hall was still empty, then said, "We'll leave through Arturo's room."

"Down the cottonwood tree?"

"Yes."

Conchita's eyes sparked with excitement. "I often climbed it when I was a young girl," she whispered. "I was an awful tomboy."

The Masked Rider opened the door wide, stepped into the hall, drew one of his guns. He could hear rough voices somewhere downstairs.

They went along the hall, the Masked Rider a step ahead of Conchita, and they were passing the landing of the stairway when, too late, they realized that the voices they had heard belonged to men ascending the stairs. There were four men coming up, and the one in the lead saw the black-shrouded figure of the Masked Rider.

The man yelled, "Watch it!"

He grabbed out his gun and opened fire.

The Masked Rider shouted, "Get back, Conchita!" He started shooting down the stairwell, and then the casa racketed with gunfire. The first hardcase was hit and crumpled to the steps, but the others leapt over him and came on. Below in the hall, others of Farnum's men gathered —Jake Lestrade among them. They too started ascending.

The Masked Rider hit another man, but now the odds were too great. He started backing up, turning north along the hall, and so became separated from Conchita. The girl had retreated as far as the doorway of her room, where she stood in frightened helplessness. The Farnum men now reached the hall, and the Masked Rider, still shooting, was forced to retreat into Arturo's room.

He saw at once that the room was empty, that Arturo had got free of his bonds and was gone. He swore under his breath, blaming the youth for having sent those gunslicks up the stairs. He slammed the door closed, found it had no lock, and so shoved a heavy cabinet against it.

He was none too soon.

Some of the Farnum men lunged against the door. It gave a scant inch, no more. The Masked Rider fired two shots across the top of the cabinet and through the door. A man yelled as though winged. Another cursed. Then there was silence except for more bootsteps pounding along the hall.

THE Masked Rider now had his opportunity to make his getaway. But he hesitated. He had the Maldonado title, but he was reluctant to go and leave Conchita a prisoner. He knew that she would want him to go, but still he was held as by invisible bonds. Then he heard Clayton Farnum's voice from the hall.

"Masked Rider! You hear me?"

"I hear you, tinhorn!"

"I assume that you came here for the Maldonado title," Farnum said flatly. "I also assume that you've found it. I don't know by what means you got into the casa, so it's possible that you can get out without my men catching you. But before you go, friend, consider that the girl is a hostage in my hands."

"Farnum, if you harm that girl—"

"I'll make the threats," Farnum broke in. "I won't be thwarted at this final stage of the game, outlaw. I give you my word that if you don't hand over that title, I'll turn the girl over to the worst of my men. That, outlaw, is my ultimatum."

"And after you've got the title?"

"The girl will be free to go."

The Masked Rider stood there in the darkness, escape at hand for himself, and felt the bitterness of defeat. He took the papers from his pocket, and thought, *"Yes; Conchita's safety is worth more."* He felt sure that Don Miguel, the people of Maldonado Rancho, and the nester-ranchers who had been burned out would agree—and would not blame him.

Then, as he held the papers in one hand and his gun in the other, he saw a way out. He thrust all but one of the documents back into his pockets, then called out, "Farnum, listen. I don't trust you any more than you trust me. I'm one kind of an outlaw, and you're another sort. I'll make a deal with you."

"I'm listening," Farnum growled.

"Send in one of your men," the Masked Rider ordered. "I'll give him the paper. I'll hold him here under my guns, until

I see the girl ride out—alone. I'll watch her leave from the window here. Is it a deal?"

"Suppose I say 'no?' "

"Then I'm leaving, Farnum!"

"All right, dammit. It's a deal."

The Masked Rider smiled dryly. "Send in your man, Farnum," he said. "Only one. If you try to rush in with a bunch, you'll never get this paper."

He backed across the dark room to the open window. Pressure was applied to the door. The cabinet made it difficult to open the door, but finally there was an opening wide enough for a man to slip through. A man entered the room. It was Jake Lestrade. The Masked Rider's gun bored at him. "Now shut the door, Jake," he said, "and shove the cabinet against it." He waited until Lestrade had obeyed, then told the hardcase to strike a match and light a candle.

A moment later they faced each other in the pale, flickering light.

Lestrade too had a cocked gun in his hand. He watched the man in the domino mask as he would have watched a coiled rattler. He was as taut as a drawn bowstring. His hat was pushed back and beads of sweat glistened on his brow. Lestrade came slowly to the center of the room. The Masked Rider tossed a folded sheet of parchment to the floor. Moving warily, never taking his eyes off the masked man, Lestrade stooped and picked it up. He backed away, stood against the cabinet by the door.

"I've got it, boss!" Lestrade yelled.

His voice was off pitch. His nerve was close to cracking.

CHAPTER XIX

A Debt Repaid

KEEPING his part of the bargain was a necessity to Farnum. He had no other choice, so far as he knew. After a brief wait, the man called, "The girl is ready to ride out, Masked Rider. She's at the gate."

The Masked Rider risked taking his eyes off Lestrade long enough to glance from the window. The cottonwood tree outside partially abscured the view, but he saw a mounted figure outside the patio gate in the glow of a lantern held by one of the Farnum men. The rider swung away, disappeared into the darkness, and the Masked Rider assumed that it was Conchita. He looked back at Jake Lestrade, saw the strain in the hardcase. Lestrade had wanted to take advantage of the brief moment the Masked Rider had been diverted, but fear had kept his gun silent.

Farnum hit the door with his gun-butt, said impatiently, "The girl's gone, Masked Rider. Now let Lestrade come out with that title!"

"He's coming, Farnum," the Masked Rider answered. "Don't have your men try to rush in when he opens the door—unless you want to bury a lot of them!"

Lestrade looked vastly relieved.

But he still kept his eyes on the Masked Rider and his gun in his hand as he moved to the side of the cabinet and shoved at it. The Masked Rider said flatly, "That's far enough, Lestrade. You can squeeze out. Shut the door after you—or I'll pump lead through it!"

Lestrade got the door open wide enough to squeeze through, and he wasted no time leaving the room. He pulled the door shut, and the Masked Rider, at the window now, one leg over the grillwork, heard the young hardcase say, almost yelling it, "Boss, there's no way out af that room but this door and the window!"

The Masked Rider waited no longef.

He leapt from the window to the tree outside, and behind him there was a crash as Farnum's men forced the door and knocked the cabinet over onto the floor. There were men below in the patio, watching the window, but they hadn't yet seen the shadowy figure in the tree. The Masked Rider climbed higher, shifted to the protruding *vigas* of the roof, and a second later lay flat upon it. Guns racketed below. Farnum's men were raking the empty room with gunshots before risking an entrance.

Rising, the Masked Rider crossed the roof to the rear. The kitchen was lower than the rest of the casa, and he lowered himself to its roof. He crossed it, crouched low, while harsh shouts sounded through the house and in the patio. By dropping from the roof at the rear of the kitchen, the Masked Rider avoided the patio en-

tirely. The drop jarred him, and he fell to his hands and knees. But he was up at once, and running toward the dark bulk of the out-buildings. He paused in the shadows of a barn, listened intently, and he heard Clayton Farnum, wild with rage, cursing Jake Lestrade.

Farnum had discovered that the document Lestrade had gotten from the Masked Rider was not the Maldonado grant from the Spanish Crown but merely a parchment of dubious value. Farnum stopped berating Lestrade and angrily ordered his men to hunt down the Masked Rider.

The Masked Rider went around the barn, headed for the creak and the clump of cottonwoods on the opposite side. He heard a clatter of hoofs, saw two riders loom through the darkness. Two Farnum men. One muttered, "Look! What's that?"

The Masked Rider was seen only as a dark, fast-moving shape. But the Farnum crowd now knew how well his disguise blended with the night. These two knew at once what that shadow was, and now their guns crashed. The Masked Rider whirled, Colts out and blasting. One of the pair cried out, reeled in the saddle. The other gigged his horse about and fled. The Masked Rider went on, unharmed, but now the damage was done. Shouts rose from the casa, and he heard a drumming of many hoofs by the time he reached the creek.

He forded the stream, giving his mountain-lion cry in a low key, to warn Blue Hawk. The reply came, and the Masked Rider and the Yaqui met among the trees. Blue Hawk was not alone. He was covering an angry Matt Brandt with his rifle, and he said, "Senor, this hombre is a bloodhound on the trail. He came here again, to get the jump on me."

BRANDT had been relieved of his guns by the Yaqui, and he was taking his setback at the hands of an Indian with bad grace. He was without fear however, and blustered, "I've got your partner, Wayne Morgan, under arrest and locked up, bandido. And I'm warning you two—"

The Masked Rider broke in, "Brandt, I've got the missing Maldonado title. It's recovery doesn't give Clayton Farnum a legal leg to stand on. He's trying to hold Maldonado range by force and—"

"Senor!" Blue Hawk interrupted. "Many riders come!"

It was true. The Farnum gunmen, in full force, were coming directly toward the cottonwood clump. The Masked Rider leapt to Midnight, caught the stallion's reins, swung to the saddle. Blue Hawk mounted his gray. The Masked Rider drew his rifle from its boot. He lingered to say, "Brandt, it's your duty to warn Farnum that he's gone too far!"

"My duty," Brandt said savagely, "is to end your deviltry!"

"My gun says different. You talk to Farnum."

The Farnum crowd had reached the creek. They must have seen their quarry among the trees for they started a heavy shooting. Brandt was creased along the arm by a slug, and that made him yell Farnum's name. His booming voice caused a let-up in the firing, and Clayton Farnum called out, "What do you want, Brandt?"

"I want an end to this shooting," Brandt said flatly. "The Masked Rider claims he's got the original title to Maldonado Rancho. That means your Gonzales title is a shaky one. You'll have to fight the Maldonado family in court and—"

"I'm settling this here and now, Brandt."

"I warn you, Farnum—"

Farnum's reply was to order his men to attack. Already half a dozen gunmen had forded the creek some distance downstream, and now they were riding hard to cut off escape from the north side of the clump. The rest of the band charged across the creek, straight toward the trees. Brandt yelled, "Indian, give me my guns! I'll show those ladrones!"

The Masked Rider saw that the three of them were caught in a trap, that an attempt to ride out would mean almost certain death, so he gave Blue Hawk a quick nod. They would need the deputy marshal for an ally in the fight that was at hand.

OUTLAW and lawman fought side by side, and their expert shooting was deadly. Blue Hawk's rifle also took a toll of the attackers. For a time, it was bedlam. Screams and shouted oaths mingled with the roar of shots. Horses with empty saddles and flying stirrups bolted. The three men among the trees fought dismounted, from cover. The attackers upon their horses and in the open

made easy targets. But after half a dozen men were shot down, the charge was broken and Farnum shrewdly tried other tactics.

He had his men dismount and take cover, and he ringed the trees with guns. It turned into a siege, and the three men in the clump were now subjected to a sniping that never let up. Slugs ripped and tore through the trees and brush, and it was a matter of time before the attacked men would be killed.

Brandt was bitter about it, and kept up a muttered cursing.

The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk, always well aware that their danger-trail might bring them to such an end as this, took the situation more stoically. They all kept up a steady fire, shooting at gun-flashes in the darkness—but seldom finding a mark. The siege lasted—for hours—eternally, it seemed. And finally Brandt said thickly, "Dawn coming. They'll pick us off easy, when it's daylight."

The Masked Rider saw too that there was now a trace of pink in the eastern sky. He knew that the burly lawman was right. They wouldn't have a chance when daylight came. A dull despair gripped him. Life was dear even to a Robin Hood outlaw who constantly flirted with death.

The brightness of dawn spread over the sky.

Jake Lestrade yelled gleefully, "Now we've got you, Masked Rider!"

And the Masked Rider thought, "Yes, you've got me, Lestrade."

The sniping grew heavier, and the enemy slugs pinned the three men down. A bullet ripped through the Masked Rider's black cape, and he thought bleakly, "The next one will get me!" He glanced dully at Blue Hawk, and the Yaqui murmured:

"Vaya con Dios, Senor."

Go with God.

So it would be.

But suddenly the besieging guns fell silent. Startled yells rose. And then the Masked Rider and his companions heard the rising thunder of many horsemen rapidly approaching. He forgot the danger that lay in exposing himself. He jumped to his feet, peered through the trees. A wave of riders swept down from a rise half a mile away.

Jose Ortega's vaqueros!

FARNUM'S men had seen the riders, and already many of them were running for their horses. But before they could flee from the oncoming band from the Morada Hills, a new threat swept down on them. The Maldonado vaqueros now appeared from the ranch buildings. They'd recovered their weapons after breaking their confinement in the village, and at their head was Arturo O'Reilly.

The Maldonado vaqueros come on afoot, through the brightening dawn, and their weapons, sixguns and rifles, started blasting. The panicky Farnum riders gathered by the creek, firing wildly, gripped by indecision. The Masked Rider sprang to his black stallion, rode out to join in the battle, and Blue Hawk came after him on his gray. The Masked Rider's rifle cracked again and again. He saw the Farnum crowd lose member ofter member. He saw some of the Maldonado vaqueros fall, Arturo among them. The riders from the Moradas came racing forward. Old Jose Ortega and Walt Owens led them.

Suddenly the Farnum crowd was in flight. The Maldonado vaqueros drove most of them toward the west, toward the Morada Hills, and the Ortega crowd swept down on them. The renegades were trapped. Already some threw away their guns and lifted empty hands in surrender. But two of the crowd had broken through the line of Maldonado vaqueros and were fleeing east.

Those two were Clayton Farnum and Jake Lestrade.

They were riding hard in the direction of Santa Rosita, and in the confusion none but the Masked Rider saw them. He swung Midnight about. The stallion leapt over the prone figure of Arturo O'Reilly, dead or unconscious on the ground, and then took up the chase.

The Masked Rider thought less harshly of Arturo now, for he felt that the youth had tried to redeem himself. Arturo had gotten free after the Masked Rider had tied him up and gone, not to tell Farnum of the Robin Hood outlaw's presence in the casa, but to conspire with the Maldonado vaqueros. He'd helped them get their guns back, then led them against the men who had seized Maldonado range. And now Arturo's blood was soaking into the land of his fathers.

The riders from the Moradas had arrived just as opportunely, and the Masked Rider was sure that Walt Owens had urged them to come when he discovered that Conchita had sneaked away from Ortega's rancho.

The Masked Rider rode hard, but his quarry had good mounts and a wide lead. The two men whipped and spurred their horses cruelly, and the Masked Rider failed to come within bullet range. He refused to give up pursuit, however, and finally he was partially rewarded. Lestrade's horse stumbled, went down. Lestrade leapt clear of the played-out animal, and took cover behind a boulder. He fired three fast shots at the oncoming masked man, who now, slowing his black mount, opened fire with his rifle.

It became a duel.

The Masked Rider fired shot after shot, but his slugs merely struck the boulder and ricochetted away. Lestrade was shooting with fear spoiling his aim. All the while the duel continued, long minutes, Clayton Farnum raced on toward Santa Rosita. Finally both Lestrade's guns were empty, and the Masked Rider circled the man's position while Lestrade frantically shoved fresh loads into one of his guns. The Masked Rider swung his rifle up as Lestrade readied to fire again. Their shots blended. It was Lestrade who went down in a lifeless heap.

The Masked Rider turned east again after Farnum. The sun was half above the horizon. The miles fell away, and ahead the Masked Rider saw the roofs of Santa Rosita. He saw a rider, Farnum, he was sure, nearing the town on a dead-beat horse that stumbled as it ran.

The burned-out nester-ranchers were camped by the town, and many of the men ran after Farnum. They yelled at the Masked Rider as he pounded in, pointed toward Farnum's office building. Farnum's sorrel horse stood in the middle of the street, head down and legs wide-spread, lather streaked and sides pumping. The Masked Rider reined in facing the open doorway, and he yelled, his voice harsh with rage, "Come out, Farnum! Come on, tinhorn! Come and face the pay-off!"

There was no reply, no movement at the door.

The Masked Rider booted his rifle, drew a six-gun, started to dismount—and Farnum tried to catch him swinging down from the saddle. A pane of glass shattered in a second-floor window. A rifle barrel was shoved through the opening. A couple of ranchers yelled warnings. The Masked Rider dropped flat as the rifle cracked, and the slug merely tore at his cape. Half a dozen guns roared. There was more shattering glass. As the Masked Rider jumped up, he saw that some of the ranchers had opened up on the man at the window. Farnum was hit by several slugs, and he slumped against the window with great force. What remained of the window gave way, and Farnum's body spilled outward to fall loosely to the street.

THE Masked Rider met Blue Hawk a couple miles outside Santa Rosita. The Yaqui had been following his compadre's trail. He said, after being told that Farnum was dead, "Senor, all is well at Maldonado Rancho—but not for us. Senor Brandt is still there. It is best that we get our outfit and leave this country."

The Masked Rider nodded his agreement.

They left the road, cut across the range, and several miles from the rancho headquarters came to a crumbling dobe in a wide ravine. Here Blue Hawk had hidden their outfit. There was a small stream and some trees for shade, and the Masked Rider, shedding his black attire, decided to remain there until dark. He told Blue Hawk, who was building a fire, to cook a meal, and the Yaqui didn't protest but again warned Morgan of the danger of arrest. Blue Hawk was uneasy about Matt Brandt, for he knew how persistent the deputy marshal was.

Morgan explained that he had to return the Maldonado land grant paper to Conchita, and he wondered often during the peaceful day if a desire to see the girl once more wasn't his real reason for wanting to return to the ranch headquarters.

They rode out with their outfit at sundown, and neared the hacienda in the gathering dusk. They left Midnight and the pinto pack horse in a gully, and rode on at a lope. Walt Owens watched them come up from the patio gateway, and as they reined in Conchita joined the young rancher. There was a fiesta going on over in the village. The peons were celebrating

the victory, and the Ortega crowd was there with the Maldonado ranch people. Wayne Morgan took the papers from his pocket, held them out to Conchita. He gave her a cowhand's lazy grin.

"The Masked Rider asked me to bring them to you, Conchita," he drawled. "He gave me a message for you, too."

"A message?" Conchita cried. "He's gone?"

"He's gone and won't be back," Morgan said. "He said to tell you he thinks Walt will make you a fine husband."

Conchita smiled. "That I know," she said quietly.

Morgan lifted his reins, a measure of regret in him. He lingered to ask, "Arturo?"

"He was wounded, but he'll recover," Walt Owens said.

Morgan nodded. All was well here. Owens would marry Conchita in time, and Maldonado Rancho would remain in good hands. The nester-ranchers would no doubt be given other range upon which to start anew. Morgan said, "Adios."

He turned his horse, then halted again. For Matt Brandt's voice growled, "You did a fine job here, friend, but you're still a wanted outlaw." He came from the patio gate, gun in hand. "You and that Indian are under arrest. Drop your guns to the ground!"

"Brandt, you're making a mistake!"

"Listen, mister," the lawman said flatly. "I thought I had you locked up, but all the while you were loose—and wearing a mask. Morgan, I've got you at last. You're the Masked Rider!"

Wayne Morgan's easy-going manner deserted him. His face was bleak.

They took the road to Santa Rosita, Morgan and Blue Hawk riding together and Matt Brandt riding behind them. The dusk thickened about them. They traveled at a walk. Morgan was troubled. Brandt had no concrete proof that he was the Masked Rider, but the lawman was convinced that he was the Robin Hood outlaw. And he might be able to convince a jury. Morgan racked his brain, trying to find a way to make Brandt doubt his own suspicions.

The problem was solved for him when they reached a rocky stretch and a voice barked, "Drop that gun, Marshal!"

A black-clad figure on a black horse rode from the rocks as Brandt obeyed, letting his gun fall with an angry oath. Morgan stared, as did Blue Hawk. It seemed to be the Masked Rider. The man wore the Masked Rider's accoutrements, his eyes were blue through the slits of the domino mask, and his mount was Midnight.

Brandt muttered, "I'll be durned! Morgan, you're not the Masked Rider!"

Morgan chuckled. "I'm just a drifting cowpoke," he drawled. "And I'll start drifting now. S'long, Marshal!"

He and Blue Hawk rode off at a lope, leaving the puzzled Matt Brandt helpless under the gun in the hand of the fake Masked Rider. They rode several miles toward Santa Rosita, then circled back across the range. It was an hour after leaving Brandt that they came to the gully where they'd left their outfit. Midnight was there, still blowing a little. The Masked Rider's disguise, and his and Blue Hawk's guns, were in the black stallion's saddlebags. Morgan buckled on his Colts, and then they rode out with Midnight and the pack horse on halter ropes.

"It was Senor Owens, eh, Senor?"

Wayne Morgan knew that it had been Walt Owens who posed as the Masked Rider to repay a debt, a debt owed by an entire range. But Morgan merely shrugged and said, *"Quien sabe?"*

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

BLACK SHADOW TRAIL

***A Thunder-Packed Masked Rider Novelet by* T. W. FORD**

Hardin surged to his feet, dragging Rader with him.

DUSTY DELIVERS

By A. LESLIE

A sand tornado sets the stage for desert tragedy when a cowman suddenly runs into a sheep—but a sturdy ram tips the scales!

JIM RADER was growing decidedly worried. Getting caught in a sand storm on the Tonto Desert was no light matter at any time. And with a mid-August Texas sun blazing down from a cloudless sky it was deadly serious for even the most experienced wasteland rider.

The Tonto was an unholy admixture of sand, salt and alkali. When a strong wind raised the burning, bitter dust in blinding clouds, the air became practically unbreathable, to which the bleached bones uncovered by the shifting dunes bore mute testimony.

It was a good thirty miles across the inferno, and Jim Rader was caught in the middle of it with the wind rising every minute.

Rader knew very well he had no business to be there. He could just as well have skirted the desert and ridden back to the HJ ranch by way of a safe and easy trail.

But the desert held a fascination for Rader, its solemnity and solitude, its

changelessness, its desolation. It was a lonely and isolated hell on earth, the ill healed scar of an ancient wound on the body of the world. But there was a glory, a raw beauty, a towering grandeur to this ghastly valley with its infernal heat, its poison dust, its weird buttes and chimney rocks sculped so fantastically by the tireless fingers of the elements. It provided a harmonious setting for grim tragedy and a fitting grave for the actors who dared to tread the treacherous boards of its terrible stage.

To one who loved the desert as Jim Rader did, that fascination provided a fiercer intoxication than that born of strong drink, a wild, mad thrill that recompensed for the certainty of physical pain, the turgid pulse, the red-hot band at the temples, the bearing down of weighted air, the drying up of flesh and blood, the constant threat of death in this land where death reigned supreme.

So Rader rode the desert trail that morning, even though the ominous redness of the dawn sky promised the possibility of storm before he reached the fertile rangeland thirty miles east of the waterless sands.

Dull gray and almost flat, league-wide wastes of speckled sand sloped gently down to a dazzling-white sunlit belt that was the bottom of the long bowl between a ridge of saw-toothed mountains and the green rangelands. Over all the valley hung a haze of color that was nameless. The mountains to the west were purple and maroon tipped by raw gold. The rangeland to the east was unseen because of a veil of silver-ash heat mist that stretched north and south as a wall.

AND Jim Rader was at the bottom of the awful bowl and less than halfway across the desert when the storm broke in fury. The blue of the sky changed to ominous saffron. The sun shone a deep, weird red-purple ball hanging motionless in a void of infinity. The sky was invisible, hidden by a pall of yellow dust. Across the ridges and in the washes dust sheets were whipped up in blinding clouds.

Flying sand rustled through the air and sometimes the wind had force enough to carry pellets of gravel. On the lower levels, as the gale roared away, the dust settled and the air cleared somewhat. But high up, the dull, yellow pall hung, apparently motionless, while that sinister sun, like a red-orange moon seen through haze, grew darker.

Already, Rader was having difficulty breathing. His lungs seemed constricted, incapable of drawing in enough oxygen to provide his body with its needs. His chest heaved as he inhaled mightily. His heart pounded. There was a peculiar throbbing at his temples and the feel of a hot band tightening and tightening around his head.

When the intermittent blasts stilled for a moment, the silence was ghastly, broken only by the tiny rustlings of the settling sand grains and the steady sucking sound made by Rader's horse as he pulled his irons from the thick blanket of dust and loosened salt with each forward step. Then the wind would swoop down again with a frenzied howl and the dust laden air would be filled with a roaring tumult.

The very bottom of the bowl was a weird and terrible abyss of flying yellow shadows and full of the moan and roar and shriek of the wind. It was a frightful burning chaos of flying dust and terrible sound. Rader rode through a strange yellow twilight flickering with shadows of umber and burnt orange, through which the dark magenta ball of the sun shone fitfully.

The wind lulled. The dust cloud thinned. Rader found himself confronted by a tremendous amphitheatre, a yellow gulf, a labyrinthine maze so astounding as to appear the wild imaginings of a dream. And just as the gale roared again and the shadows thickened, Rader heard a cry.

"What in blazes?" he muttered. "Am I goin' loco?"

And then he heard it again, a pitiful thin bleating. It *was* a cry—the agonized appeal of something alive. But how could there be a living thing here in this inferno of heat, desolation and decay, here amid the appalling nudity of the racked bowels of the earth? Despite the awful heat, Rader felt the palms of his hands grow moist. Did these horrible depths give up their dead when tortured by the fury of the storm? Release them to the outer air to shriek their despair and torment? Rader shuddered and strained his ears.

The wind screamed madly, the sound spiralling high into the heavens to thin to a moaning whimper. There was another lull. The dust cloud lessened, the light grew stronger. And Rader saw the author of the cry.

"Good gosh!" he exclaimed, "a sheep!"

The woolie saw him, bleated plaintively, limped toward him, one hind foot dragging. It was a young ram with a thick coat.

"Hurt!" the cowboy muttered. "Some blasted herder was trailin' a bunch across here and left that feller behind when he couldn't keep up. Well, that's just like a herder!"

Jim Rader had no more use for sheep than the average cowhand, but not even a sheep, he reasoned, should be consigned to such a fate as threatened this one.

"As if I ain't got trouble enough, you'd have to show up!" he swore as he halted his big roan and slid from the hull.

Still swearing, he gathered the injured creature in his arms and remounted, cradling the sheep across the pommel.

"Chances are we'll both go to hell before the day is over," he told the ram. "Old Leather Lip is makin' hard enough goin' as it is, without packin' another hundred pounds or so. Well, you'll feel at home in the Hot Place. Ought to be plenty of herders there. Chances are it ain't no hotter than this hole, though. Here comes that infernal wind again!"

AND this time the wind really got down to business. The velocity increased. The lulls ceased. The dust clouds thickened and the ominous yellow glow deepened to a curdling of flying fiery shadows. Rader's lips began to crack, his tongue to swell. He started coughing, and couldn't stop.

The horse wheezed and gurgled. Its filtering nostrils kept out some of the dust but its breathing became labored. Its head sank lower, and its gait changed to a shambling walk.

Rader wound his neckerchief across his mouth and nose, but it didn't help. The fine, poisonous dust of the salt and alkali got in. If he tightened the cloth sufficiently to shut it out, enough air to keep him going could not seep through the heavy silk. And to breathe the dust would soon be fatal.

Rader felt within him the first stirrings of panic, the frightful, reason-destroying fear that is one of the desert's chief weapons. He set his teeth, got a grip on himself. To give way to the emotion of terror could mean but one end—another skeleton bleaching on the hot sands.

"Reckon it's curtains," he muttered dully. "Took one chance too many, that's all. Wonder if the boys will ever find what's left of me?"

His straight back and square shoulders began to sag. His head drooped forward. He began not really to care what happened. Anything would be better than this nightmare torment of thirst, heat and slow suffocation. All but unconscious, he reeled on the back of his staggering horse. His head drooped still lower, until his face was buried in the thick wool that clothed the ram's back.

And abruptly Rader realized he was breathing dust free air again. Had the wind stopped? He raised his head, and the dust beat against his face in a choking cloud.

Instinctively he ducked again, snuggling his face against the protecting wool. And again he could breathe.

Rader suddenly had the answer. The sheep's thick wool! It filtered out the poisonous dust-particles but allowed the air to come through. With a gasp of thanksgiving, Rader buried his face deeper in the life saving covering.

Leather Lip was climbing the far slope of the bowl, now. He was making hard going of it, but he was steadily forging ahead. A dragging half hour passed. He topped the lip of the bowl, plunged on. And as suddenly as it had risen, the wind began to fall. The dust cloud thinned, the air cleared. The bloody eye of the sun shone through the upper pall. Another five minutes and the sky above was clear blue.

Jim Rader turned in his saddle and gazed back toward the awful pit of death that had so nearly been his grave. His glance dropped to the ram.

"Feller," he said, his voice shaking a little, "I reckon doin' a good turn pays off sooner or later. This time it was sooner. If I hadn't stopped to give you a chance, I'd have took the Big Jump. Well, I won't forget it. Another half-hour and we'll come to water. Then I'll pack you

home and fix up that strained leg. Looks sort of like you've won yourself a home!"

AND thus Dusty, as Rader named the ram, was introduced to the HJ spread. The story lost nothing in the telling when Rader regaled the HJ boys with an account of his experience, and Dusty got the full credit due him.

The HJ boys were very fond of their big amiable, square-shooting range boss and they accepted Dusty without reservation.

"But what will the old man say when he shows up?" Cal Carter, Rader's particular bunky, worried. "Yuh know how he feels about sheep—any sheep."

"That's botherin' me," Rader admitted. "He'll paw sod for fair when he sees a woolie browsin' around on his grass. Well, he won't be back for a couple of weeks, and mebbe somethin' will bust loose before then."

Rader's fears were not ungrounded. Old Hap Jorgens, who owned the HJ, hated sheep with the hatred of the old-timer for all woolies and their destructive habits of feeding. Sheep ruin cattle range, unless properly handled. They eat a country bare when grass is scant, cropping it down to the ground, and it is an axiom of cow land that they destroy more than they eat.

They feed in compact masses and their sharp, chisel feet, driven by a hundredweight of solid bone and flesh, cut out even the roots of the grass. Vegetation may be killed for years to come. The story of sheep in the cow country has been a story of unceasing conflict, a conflict in which the wooly could lose every battle and yet win the war.

While the young cowboys of the HJ had no use for sheep, their animosity was less intense than that of their boss and other cowmen of corresponding age. The dislike extended only mildly to individual members of the species. None of it reached Dusty, the woolie that saved Jim Rader's life.

Under vigorous applications of horse liniment, Dusty's strained leg mended rapidly. He grew vigorous and frisky, and became a prime favorite with the HJ hands. They teased him, bullied him, played with him. Dusty did not resent the horseplay to which he was subjected, but he retaliated in kind.

Woe to the man who bent over in his presence. The impact of Dusty's horns, with Dusty's hundredweight of moving flesh behind them, on the seat of the pants, tended to destroy equilibrium, disturbed digestion and created an aversion to a sitting position for some time to come.

Hang Soon, the Chinese cook, learned that a week after Dusty's arrival at the HJ. Hang ambled out with a big bucket of garbage, which he intended to bury, as was his custom. He placed the bucket on the ground, bent over and began to dig. Scant seconds later he was standing on his head in the filled garbage bucket. He came out with stale oatmeal in his hair, coffee grounds in his eyes, and bacon rind hanging from his ears.

Hang knew how to swear in English, Spanish and Chinese. This time he exhausted the vituperative possibilities of all three languages. Dusty was not impressed.

Which was how the situation stood when old Hap Jorgens, the owner, arrived a week later, shortly after dark. Old Hap had completed a highly successful business trip and was in a prime good humor, which did not last. He dismounted in the ranchhouse yard, removed a heavy and clinking satchel from where it was securely roped to the saddlehorn, bent over and placed it gently on the ground.

The next instant he was flat on his face, the seat of his pants ringing like a bell.

"Robbers!" roared old Hap. "Help! help!"

Squirming over, he jerked his gun and blazed away with all six cartridges.

THE only thing that saved Dusty was the fact that Jorgens shot where he figured the thickest part of his assailant should be, which was several feet above Dusty's wooly back.

The HJ hands, aroused by the tumult, boiled from the bunkhouse, guns ready, and found nothing to shoot at. Somebody brought a lantern. The beams showed Dusty standing complacently near by.

"What the blue blazes is that!" bellowed Jorgens.

"A sheep," Jim Rader replied in a very small voice.

"A sheep!" thundered Jorgens. "What

in the name of the devil is a dang-blasted sheep doin' on my range?"

"He's mine," Rader replied. "I'll tell yuh about him later."

"You'll tell *me!*" howled Jorgens, his mustache bristling in his scarlet face. "I'm tellin' *you!* Get that unmentionable woolie off my range as soon as it's light! A sheep! And a—a damn fool buttin' ram at that! If I had another ca'tridge in my gun I'd mow him down! A sheep on the HJ!"

Still sputtering profanity, he limped into the house, bearing his clinking satchel with him. Jim Rader followed in silence. The hands discreetly retired to the bunkhouse for some muffled laughter.

"I figgered Red Hardin had me for sure!" snorted Jorgens as he placed the satchel on a table. "That hellion's operatin' in this section, I heard, and I'm sure for certain he tailed me all the way here from Horse River. Twice durin' the day I spotted a jigger ridin' along in the brush on the hill slopes. I 'low it was darn lucky for me that the trail keeps away from them hills all the way.

"He'd have had to leave cover to get within gun range of me, and I had my Winchester across my lap all the time. Reckon he was scairt to take a chance. Or too smart, rather. When that blankety-blank sheep hit me, the first thing I thought of was Hardin. It would be like that owlhoot to sneak up on me in the dark right in my own yard. He's ornery enough to eat off the same plate with a snake, but yuh'll hafta hand it to him for havin' plenty of sand in his craw.

"Uh-huh, he's got wrinkles on his horns and is prime salty. I wouldn't put it past him to pull somethin' like that, pertickler if he got wind of what I was packin', and he 'pears to find out about everythin'."

Jim Rader looked grave. The giant, red-headed outlaw was a cold proposition, all right, and plumb snake-blooded. If it was really he trailing Jorgens, the Old Man was lucky. When necessary, Hardin shot first and robbed afterward.

"Yuh did all right on the trip, then?" Rader asked.

"Sure did," Jorgens replied. "Put over the deal with Shanghai Smith. He's takin' every head we can round up. I gave him an estimate and he paid cash on the barrel-head, like he always does. Said if there's any slip-up in the figures, either way, we can settle the difference later.

"You know how he handles deals. Had that colored feller of his ridin' along with him, leadin' a mule loaded down with gold and silver. Shanghai had the dinero dumped out on a blanket, like he always does, and counted the price in gold. He was glad to get the cows. Figgers to run 'em up to his new spread."

Rader nodded. "Reckon it's up to us to get busy pronto," he observed.

"That's right," Jorgens replied. "First thing in the mornin' I want the boys to head for the southwest pasture and comb out every head they can. Hang Soon will take the chuck wagon along and they can work a night shift. You and me will ride to town tomorrow and bank this dinero. I won't feel safe about it till it's in the vault. Plenty in that satchel, Jim."

In his excitement over the big deal, Jorgens had forgotten all about Dusty. Rader did not feel inclined to refresh his memory. He decided to wait until morning to put in a plea for his wooly friend. Perhaps old Hap would be more reasonable after a good night's rest.

EARLY morning found the HJ bunkhouse deserted. There was not even a wrangler around. The kitchen was also empty, Hang Soon having rolled off with the chuck wagon at the first light of day.

Rader got Jorgens' breakfast for him. They ate together in the dining room, then repaired to the living room for a smoke before heading to town. Jorgens packed the money satchel into the dining room with him, and thence to the living room, where he deposited it on a table. As they smoked, they discussed the probabilities of where strays would be holed up.

They became so absorbed in the discussion that neither heard the stealthy steps that crossed the veranda to the half-open door. Their eyes jerked up only when the door crashed wide, to stare into the black muzzle of a rock-steady gun. Behind the gun was a giant of a man.

"Elevate," rumbled Red Hardin.

Rader and Jorgens obeyed. There was nothing else to do. They were caught settin', figuratively and literally.

"All right," ordered Hardin. "Stand up, now, and face the wall. Get your noses against it. Easy! You know me. Make a

move and—well, you know me!"

Rader and Jorgens did as directed. Old Hap cursed under his breath.

His gun trained on his victims' backs, Hardin glided to the table. He picked up the money satchel with his left hand and hurled it out the door. It struck the ground with a clank. Dusty standing near the veranda steps, jumped, and eyed the satchel suspiciously.

Hardin moved forward again. Slowly and with the greatest care, he drew Jorgens' gun from its holster and thrust it under his own belt. Then he performed a like office on Rader.

The range boss stood with tense muscles, but he did not move. To do so would be committing suicide. He did not believe that Hardin would shoot them unless forced to. As Jorgens had said, Hardin had plenty of wrinkles on his horn. He did not lack savvy. He undoubtedly knew that while folks got mildly riled over a robbery, they seldom go plumb on the prod because of one. But a snake-blooded killing is another matter. A murdered man is liable to have relatives or friends who will make it a life business to track down his killer. Something the saltiest owlhoot doesn't care to go up against.

But old Hap's money was as good as gone. Hardin' would realize that there was a good chance that more guns were somewhere in the house, but would have little fear of his victims being able to arm themselves in time to prevent a getaway. A few racing steps to the edge of the grove, where his magnificent sorrel horse stood, and he would be in the hull and out of gun range.

SLOWLY Hardin backed away, his cold eyes never leaving the pair facing the wall. He sidled through the open door and down the steps, gun barrel still lined. He reached the ground, backed past the satchel and bent over to pick it up.

And Dusty hit him!

Hardin lunged forward, completely off balance. His head cracked against the edge of the lowest veranda step, hard. His gun went off with a roar, then spun from his hand. Half dazed, he flopped and floundered. And before he could recover, Jim Rader hit him!

Rader went across the veranda and over the steps in a streaking dive. He landed squarely on top of Red Hardin and gripped the owlhoot's wrist just as he jerked one of the guns from his belt. The bullet yelled past Rader's ear as Hardin pulled trigger. Over and over they rolled, hitting, kicking, wrenching.

Hardin was a giant, but Jim Rader was not a small man, and his blazing anger lent him strength. He hung onto Hardin's twisting wrist with one hand and slashed at the owlhoot's face with the other. Hardin tried to draw the second gun from his belt but Rader knocked his hand aside and rocked Hardin's head back with a thundering jolt to the owlhoot's jaw.

Old Hap Jorgens came bounding down the steps, bellowing curses. He grabbed up Hardin's fallen gun, but didn't dare use it for fear of hitting Rader.

Putting forth his mighty strength to the utmost, Hardin surged to his feet, dragging Rader with him. He wrenched his wrist free and pointed his gun with a yell of triumph.

Rader struck with his left hand, putting every ounce of his two hundred pounds behind the blow. His fist thudded against Hardin's jaw like the smack of a cleaver.

A blank expression crossed Hardin's face. He sagged, whirled about and pitched headlong, the gun falling from his limp hand. Rader leaped over and knelt beside him, fist poised to strike again. But Hardin was completely out.

"Get a rope!" Rader panted.

Old Hap pounded into the house and ran back with one. A moment later Red Hardin was securely hogtied.

Jim Rader stood up, wiping the blood from his face. Jorgens glared down at the unconscious owlhoot.

"We'll hitch up the buckboard and take him to town," he said. "There's a reward on that sidewinder, Jim, and you've sure earned it."

Rader glanced toward Dusty, who was staring across the rangeland.

"Reckon that sheep had oughta come in for half," he observed.

Old Hap also gazed at Dusty. He tugged his mustache.

"Yuh know, Jim," he remarked, "that feller 'pears sort of lonesome. Got the look of a family man to me. Uh-huh, needs women folks. Tell yuh, what, on our way back, we'll stop off at Pedro's sheep ranch and buy a nice ewe to keep him company."

Working for an indecisive sheriff and tangling with a human snake can be rough going, but it's all part of—

A DEPUTY'S LIFE

By SAM BRANT

SHERIFF HERCULES BOGG tugged at the drooping ends of his long, black mustache. He leaned back in the chair behind the battered flat-top desk in his office and looked thoughtfully out of the window. The bright sunlight of a warm July morning gleamed down on the little cowtown.

"It will probably be a nice day if it doesn't rain," the sheriff announced, quite sure that his deputy had been waiting breathlessly for this enlightening bit of information. "And doubtlessly will remain warm."

The deputy sighed sadly. He was tall and thin and looked like a lonesome giraffe in range clothes. His name was almost as long as he was tall. It was Huntington Hillsborough, but everybody just called him Hunt, or Hunt Hills.

In Hunt's estimation, working for Sheriff Bogg was a caution to cowboys and a blight on deputies. The sheriff considered himself an oracle, a seer, and the smartest lawman to be found anywhere. The words he uttered were pearls of wisdom cast before swine, but in the two years that Hunt had been Hercules Bogg's deputy he had never known the sheriff to make a definite and positive statement about anything.

"That lone bandit they call the Sidewinder held up and robbed a stage over near Coyote Wells yesterday," Hunt said. "Folks are doing a lot of talking, most of which isn't flattering. They're claiming it was time we caught that hombre."

"Probably we'll get him soon, if some unforeseen circumstances doesn't prevent us from doing so," said the sheriff. "Either this Sidewinder is a man of brains, or a stupid individual."

"Unhuh," Hunt said wearily. "And he may rob somebody else if he doesn't decide against it."

The two lawmen stopped talking as a big man stepped in through the open door of the office. Burton McForran owned the big Three Star outfit south of the town, and he was an important man in Sage County. At the moment he appeared annoyed about something.

"Good morning, Mr. McForran," said the sheriff. "At least, it seems like a pleasant day."

"Never mind that!" McForran snapped. "I'm not interested in the weather."

"Some people are and others aren't," Bogg said. "It is a matter of taste."

"Shut up and listen!" McForran glared at the sheriff. "I've just been held up and robbed on my way into town. I was carrying five thousand dollars I received for the sale of some pure-bred stock. I intended to deposit that money in the bank, and now it's gone."

"Five thousand dollars," said the sheriff. "That's a lot of money, and then again it isn't—depending upon the circumstances of the owner."

McFORRAN continued to glare at the sheriff and got red in the face. If looks could kill, Hercules Bogg was now dying a slow and painful death.

"Who held you up, Burt?" Hunt asked. He had once worked as a cowboy for the Three Star and was usually on friendly terms with his former boss. "Was it the Sidewinder?"

"I don't know, Hunt," McForran said, obviously finding it a relief to talk to the deputy. "The holdup man was dressed in ordinary range clothes, and he wore a dark bandanna that hid the lower part of his face."

"Then it was the Sidewinder, or then again it might not have been," said Sheriff Bogg. "Hard to be sure under the circumstances."

"Whoever it was, I want him caught right away," McForran snapped. "And I want my money back! If you don't get him before this week is over I'll see that you both are thrown out of office. We have lawmen who *can* do their job in this county! There is no possibly or perhaps about that!"

With that, the owner of the Three Star stalked out of the office. Hunt looked at the sheriff and said nothing. Bogg frowned, and looked like he was going to make another important announcement.

"Either he actually meant it, or he didn't," said the sheriff. "Looks like we had better try to capture the Sidewinder, if that is possible."

"You ever stop to think that this Sidewinder might be some local man around here?" Hunt asked. "It seems strange that he decided to hold up McForran this morning."

"Well, yes and no," said Bogg carefully. "Why?"

"The Sidewinder must have known McForran was carrying five thousand dollars in cash," said the deputy. "Usually a rancher riding into town in the middle of the month would be pretty slim pickings for a holdup man." Hunt glanced through the open door of the office. "Burt was smart, though, hiding that second five thousand in his boot, so the Sidewinder didn't even know McForran had the cash on him."

"Who—what—why—w h i c h ?" B o g g stared dazedly at the human beanpole that was his deputy. The sheriff wasn't even very good at asking a direct question.

"McForran sure trusts us," Hunt went on, completely ignoring the sheriff's sputtering. "Giving us five thousand dollars to guard when he could have just put the money in the bank."

From his expression, it was obvious that Hercules Bogg had made up his mind about one thing at last. He had decided that Huntington Hillsborough was completely crazy.

"You'll be all right, if you don't feel worse, Hunt," the sheriff said soothingly. "Probably something you ate, or haven't you had breakfast yet?"

Hunt did not answer. He was watching the thin, sandy-haired man who peered around the edge of the office door like an inquisitive dog. Horace Shoemaker always acted as if he were expecting someone to come up behind him and give him a good swift kick.

"Are you alone, or can anybody come in?" Shoemaker asked, in a voice that reminded Hunt of a buzzsaw and was just as soothing. "I've got something important to tell you about a desperate character."

"Come in, Horace," Hunt said resignedly.

In the deputy's estimation, Horace Shoemaker could be the local half-wit if he were just a little brighter. He fondly believed he was a cowboy, but there wasn't one of the ranchers within fifty miles of the town who shared his opinion. In their estimation, floods, blizzards, dry spells and stampedes were nothing compared to having Horace Shoemaker work for them. He possessed the gift of always doing the wrong thing at the right time.

He had last worked on the Circle J over east. That had been two years ago. The job was gone, but the memory lingered on. The Circle J cook had been there thirty years, but he quit the fourth day Horace was a member of the outfit. Every time he got a meal ready Horace managed to knock over the pots and pans before anyone got a chance to eat, and the cook was noted for being long on age and short on temper.

HORACE entered the sheriff's office now, comparatively quietly. He stumbled over the door sill, fell against the sheriff's desk and knocked over an open bottle of ink. He backed up and stumbled over Hunt's long legs. Horace felt himself falling and grabbed a shelf on the wall.

The shelf broke, and when it dropped to the floor so did the clock that was Sheriff Bogg's cherished possession, Hunt's favorite pipe, and a can of tobacco that spilled and mixed nicely with the pools of ink on the floor.

"You clumsy idiot!" Bogg roared. The sheriff was so mad that he forgot and made a definite statement. "Why don't you look where you're going?"

"I wasn't going anywhere," said Horace mildly. "I just came in to tell you about a desperate character."

"Oh, sure," Hunt said, relief sweeping over him as he picked up his pipe and found it wasn't broken. "I suppose you're going to tell us you're the mysterious bandit called the Sidewinder."

"How did you guess it?" Horace looked surprised. "I was sure it was a secret that no one knew."

"You're plumb loco!" Sheriff Bogg picked up the clock. It was a bit dented, but still running. He place it on the desk. "Where did you get the crazy idea that you were the Sidewinder, Horace?"

"Certainly is foolish, isn't it?" Hunt said. The deputy sat down again and he had his Colt in his hand, covering the sandy-haired man. "You know, if we believed you it would be dangerous for you. You might even get shot."

"I—I was just joking." Horace looked nervously at the gun in Hunt's hand. The waddy was also wearing a Colt in his holster, but no one had ever seen Shoemaker use the weapon. "I'm not the Sidewinder, of course. But I know who he really is, though!"

"Who?" demanded the sheriff.

"I—I suspect that Burt McForran is the Sidewinder," Horace said.

"McForran?" exclaimed Hunt. "Why do you think that?"

"I'll tell you." Horace sat down in a chair and, to the amazement of all three men, nothing happened. "This morning, I was out taking a ride across the rangeland over west of town. I saw McForran coming but he didn't see me. I rode back in among some trees so I could watch him without being seen. He kept looking back and all around, as though to make sure no one was watching him. I thought that was strange."

"So do I," said Hunt. "Go on, Horace."

"When McForran reached a big boulder at the side of the pass," Horace continued, "he got off his horse and wrapped something that looked like a roll of money in a handkerchief, dug a little hole beneath the rock and hid it there. Then he got back on his horse and rode away in the direction of town. I followed him on in here to Powder Ridge."

"Then you must have seen McForran come here a little while ago," said Hunt. "That right?"

"I did." Horace nodded. "I listened outside the office and heard him tell about being held up by the Sidewinder. But I didn't see anyone hold him up."

"Can you show us the place where you saw McForran hide the money?" asked the sheriff.

Hunt liked the way Bogg was talking now. No hedging about what he said, and to the deputy, the sheriff was beginning to sound like a real lawman.

"I don't need to show you," Horace said. "You know that big rock at the edge of the trail through the pass. It is the only one there. You could find it all right without me. A feller told me he might be able to get a job for me on a spread seventy miles north of here. I'm to meet him here in Powder Ridge today or tonight, so I want to stick around town."

"All right, Horace." Hunt dropped his gun back into the holster. "We'll find that rock when we get around to it. Thanks for telling us about McForran."

"You're welcome."

Horace got to his feet. He stepped carefully over the deputy's long legs and walked out of the office without looking back.

"Could be, and then again it might not," said the sheriff, thoughtfully.

Hunt nodded. This was one time when he agreed perfectly with Hercules Bogg.

"We'll have to take a look at that rock," Hunt said. "But I figure we better wait until evening. Don't forget that if Horace was listening outside the office, he heard me mention that second five thousand

that McForran supposedly turned over to us for safekeeping. And Horace talks a lot. Somebody might be tempted to try and get that money, Sheriff."

"And then again, they might not," said Bogg. "You never can tell. But if Horace was listening all the time he didn't hear Burt say anything about any second five thousand dollars."

"Unhuh." Hunt grinned. "Horace may be sure of that, and he may not!"

THE TWO lawmen spent the day hanging around town. They ate their meals at the restaurant down the street, they chatted with various local citizens. Finally, just as it was growing dark, they saddled their horses. Then they locked the office and rode out of town.

The moon had risen when they reached the pass and found the rock. A quick search proved there was no bundle of money wrapped in a handkerchief buried beneath the boulder. "Thought so," said the sheriff. "What do we do now?"

"You hand over that five thousand you were too smart to leave in your office," said a deep voice behind them. "And don't touch your guns!"

They swung around to find a man on horseback covering them with a gun. His face was hidden by a bandanna mask, so that only his eyes were visible beneath the pulled-down brim of his hat and the top of the neckerchief.

"The Sidewinder!" Hunt exclaimed.

"That's right," growled the masked man. "Hand over that *dinero*! Hurry up!"

"Don't shoot," said the sheriff. "It's in the saddle-bag on my horse. I'll get the money."

"All right," snapped the "Sidewinder." "Get it!"

Hercules Bogg walked over to his ground-hitched horse. The coat the sheriff was wearing because of the chill in the air fluttered in the night breeze. Bogg reached the horse and fumbled with the saddle. When he turned there was a gun in his hand. He fired wildly.

The Sidewinder gave a startled yell and dashed away, his horse going at a gallop. The sheriff leaped into the saddle and chased after the outlaw. Bogg was still firing wildly, with more noise than aim.

Hunt raised his gun and aimed carefully. He fired and his bullet got the outlaw in the left arm. The Sidewinder dropped the reins and an instant later his horse bucked and he went flying out of the saddle. He landed hard and stayed where he had fallen.

In a few moments the sheriff and the deputy had reached the spot and were covering the Sidewinder with their guns. Hunt pulled down the bandanna mask.

It was the face of Horace Shoemaker that glared up at him.

"So you *were* the Sidewinder, Horace," Hunt said. "I suspected that when you came into the office today. For sometime, I have thought you're awkwardness was overdone. No one could be that clumsy all the time unless they did it deliberately."

"Planned being the Sidewinder for two years," Horace admitted. "Knew if I established a reputation of being dumb and awkward, no one would suspect me of being the lone bandit. I was so sure of it, that I even told you I was the Sidewinder at the office."

"But you changed your mind about that when you found we were almost beginning to believe you," said Hunt. "You heard me mention that second five thousand McForran supposedly turned over to us. You wanted that money, so you made up the yarn about Burt hiding the money beneath the rock, so you could get us out of town."

"Also, probably so we would suspect McForran of being the Sidewinder," said the sheriff. "Search him, Hunt, and see if he has the five thousand on him that was stolen from McForran. I'll keep him covered."

Hunt searched the prisoner and found the money. There was plenty of proof now that Horace was the Sidewinder.

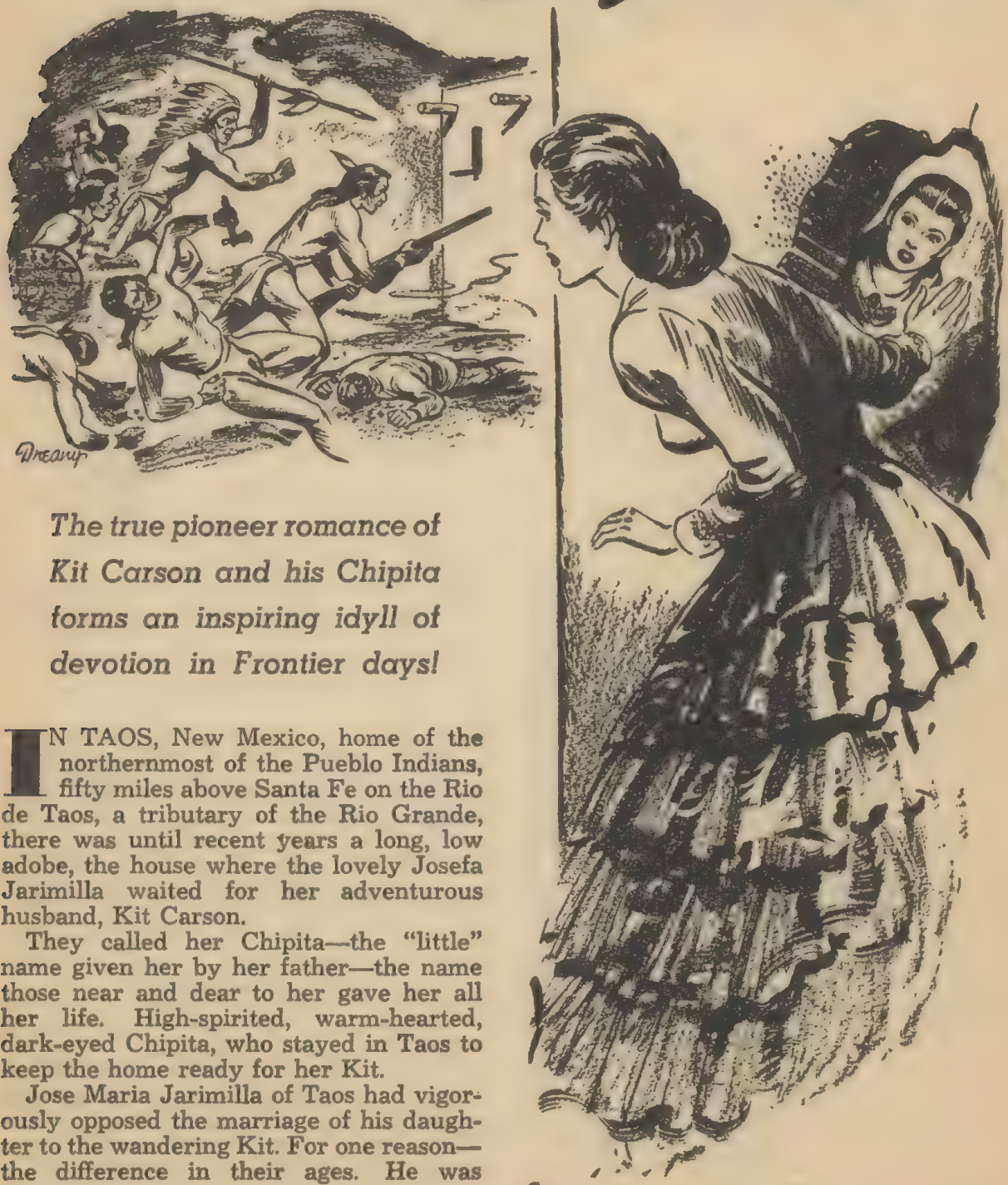
"Looks like we've got him, if he doesn't escape," said the sheriff. "We'll take him back to town and place him in jail, if nothing happens to prevent it."

Hunt sighed as he tied up the prisoner and then went to get his horse. Sheriff Hercules Bogg had returned to normal. A deputy's life was not a happy one.

•

Read Our Companion Magazine GIANT WESTERN, 25c at all Newsstands!

The Lovely Josefa



The true pioneer romance of Kit Carson and his Chipita forms an inspiring idyll of devotion in Frontier days!

IN TAOS, New Mexico, home of the northernmost of the Pueblo Indians, fifty miles above Santa Fe on the Rio de Taos, a tributary of the Rio Grande, there was until recent years a long, low adobe, the house where the lovely Josefa Jarimilla waited for her adventurous husband, Kit Carson.

They called her Chipita—the "little" name given her by her father—the name those near and dear to her gave her all her life. High-spirited, warm-hearted, dark-eyed Chipita, who stayed in Taos to keep the home ready for her Kit.

Jose Maria Jarimilla of Taos had vigorously opposed the marriage of his daughter to the wandering Kit. For one reason—the difference in their ages. He was thirty-six, she was sixteen. And he was most always gone, a roaming man who disappeared over the mountains for months and months at a time.

by HARRY VAN DEMARK

Kit Carson wouldn't settle down. He'd be guiding someone to California, or be off with the Indians, fighting them, or making treaties—Josefa wouldn't know which. Who knew what he did when he was gone?

But Josefa had a will of her own and marry the blue-eyed Kit she would. Nothing could change her. Her faith in him never wavered, nor was it ever betrayed. The man whose name was an avenging sword to bad Indians, who had survived incredible dangers, was as shy and gentle and as tender as a woman. Quietly and simply he went about his life with his wife and she adored him.

Carson Woos Josefa

Romance has been compared to a gossamer flower, but its roots are deep and strong. They grew in Chipita's heart and she understood her husband.

And so there came the day when she put on her wedding dress. It was silk—white, sprinkled with quaint little bunches of blue flowers, and it came all the way from California.

Horses had walked across the deserts and over mountains that Josefa Jarimilla might stand one day in May, 1843, before the priest in her blue-flowered dress. There were yards of silk in the billowing skirt. And through the folds of the creamy mantilla the tight little bodice curved.

Around her throat was an exquisite chain of Spanish gold, its links formed of hearts in delicate filigree. It was caught together with three flowers of gold, each with a little pearl in the center. And in her ears were pendants of gold and pearls. Her gloves were short and of the finest white buckskin.

Chipita must have seemed a lovely thing to Kit Carson.

Whether he had been willing or not, Jose Jarimilla proved a fine father-in-law. He gave the young people the long, low adobe with his blessing.

That year Kit stayed home from his wanderings. The house was the meeting place of trappers, traders, scouts, Indians and men with eyes fixed on far places. Chapters of California history were written there, for Fremont sat by the fire. The mistress of the house understood these men, their dreams and their needs. She sympathized with them and laughed with them. Intelligence and humor were hers.

Keeping the house was not easy for Josefa. There were hides piled in the patio and stretched around to dry. Water had to be carried in from the well. Meals for the varied number of hungry men had to be cooked and the iron Dutch ovens (brought from Kansas City) swung over the open fire, burned her fingers many times.

In them she baked her tortillas. They were different from the Mexican tortilla of ground corn and water. These were made of flour and shortening and milk. And flour was hard to get. The grain had to be taken many miles to a mill or ground in small quantities by hand at home.

In the spring of 1844 Kit started for California with Fremont, and Josefa commenced the first of her long waits. Fortunately she was not alone. Her family lived in Taos and kept her company and she had taken two Indian girls to raise for servants.

Then there was Juan, a little four-year-old Navajo Indian whom his Ute captors had sold to Kit for one horse. He was to have been killed, but a live horse was worth more to a Ute than a little dead Navajo boy. Josefa took him to her generous heart. She loved children, and though she did not know it, seven years were to pass before she had babies of her own.

But she had plenty to do helping other women with theirs. There was always the menace of hostile Indians and women of the outlying ranches came in to the safety of the settlement when their babies were to be born. Chipita held many another woman's child in her arms before her own came to fill them.

Indians Massacre Whites

It was during one of Kit's absences that the Taos massacre occurred. Josefa's sister, the wife of Governor Bent, had in her house as a guest their niece, Senora Boggs, from Colorado and Josefa went over to visit and share the fun.

There was dancing and life at the American governor's house and all was happiness, when the dread word, "Indians!" came. Gates and doors were barricaded and the family and guests awaited the as-

sault, the men ready to stand at their posts if only the women could escape.

Brave, resourceful Josefa marshaled her sister and niece and the servants and those plucky women dug through the thick adobe wall with iron spoons from the kitchen and escaped. Governor Bent and twelve other men were scalped.

The attack was concentrated on the governor's house, instigated by a man named Martinez who hated and feared the encroaching Americans.

Josefa, the housewife, had another important task to perform while her husband was gone. The walls of the adobe must be freshened to gladden his eye when he returned. So from the hills they brought hayspa, a white rock. This they baked in their round outdoor ovens until it softened enough to be pounded up. The pounded rock was slaked with water until every bubble had disappeared and a smooth, milky mixture, with a little bluing added to make it even whiter, was ready for use.

Josefa had never heard of a camel's hair paint brush. She used the brush she knew, a square of sheepskin. She dipped it in the whitewash and with the long even strokes the walls gleamed anew. She sang as she worked. Kit was coming home. Kit would see the new white wall.

He always came home to Taos where Chipita waited. No matter where or how far he roamed, there was his lodestar. Several times he started on the long trek back to Missouri, where he had lived as a boy, but he never made it. Homesick, he would turn back, joining parties of trappers headed West or engaging as guide to explorers westward bound. His first trip with Fremont began that way.

Children Are Born

After seven years children came to the long adobe house—eight in fourteen years. After each one Kit shyly laid in Chipita's lap a present—a new silk dress. Life was fuller now and her duties multiplied. There was added joy and added worry, too. There were lurking dangers.

The Carsons had bought a ranch at Rayado where they raised cattle and sometimes stayed. One day as Josefa, followed by three-year-old William and just-toddling Teresina, went about her duties there, a terrified Mexican boy rode in.

"Indians! Indians!" he cried.

With the speed of fear and experience Josefa handed the boy Teresina and sent him flying. Snatching up her little boy and calling the Indian servant girls, she followed, their horses' hoofs pounding away to safety. They flung themselves into the stockade of the next ranch.

But the Mexican boy and Teresina were not there! The sheer, stark terror of that moment. Broken-hearted, they went back over the road home, and there in the brush at the side of the road lay her baby—safe and sound. The Mexican boy in his fright had tossed her into the bushes and run away. The Indians had torn past without seeing the child.

Indians did not always mean trouble. There were the friendly Comanches, whose grave-faced chiefs sat in council with Kit Carson at Taos. The older children sat fascinated by that talk around the family fireside, and begged for the privilege of sleeping between the visitors that they might ask more questions. To sleep on the *almadon* between two Comanches was an honor.

Years passed over Josefa and her Kit. He grew weary of wandering and his health began to break. Josefa was to receive a grant of land near Los Animas in Colorado, where already the Boggs family, her relatives, had moved, establishing the settlement of Boggsville.

Josefa's flock numbered six little ones now—one she had lost—and they journeyed by wagon to their new home. But there was some delay in the deeding of the grant and the Carsons stayed on in the Boggs house.

There Kit knew he was to start on that last long journey from which he was never to return to the adobe house he loved. And there, on April 8, 1868, little Josefa Carson was born.

When the baby was fifteen days old, Chipita, glad her time of illness was over and that soon she would be able to take care of Kit, who lay so sick in the next room, sat on her bed on the floor, combing Teresina's hair. Then suddenly she cried: "*Vien poca,* Kit!"

Kit got to her and Josefa died as she would have loved to, in his arms.

One month later from Fort Lyons, where they had moved him, Kit went home to Josefa.

Big Red Badger was so busy with the plow that he forgot to look where he was going

Headache Homestead

By NORMAN E. BACON

It's no fun for bronc-twisters to become churn-twisters and for cowboy riders to get behind the plow on a farm!

BIG Red Badger was getting mad. He knew his face was growing red and he could feel his neck beginning to bow like a rooster's. He had a suspicion he was making a darn fool out of himself and it made him madder still.

He faced the waddies gathered together in the lamplight of the Tipsy T bunkhouse and knew he was up against mutiny.

Slim Riggs, the tall Texan, spoke up for all of them.

"Yuh just cain't make churn-twisters out of riders, boss. Yuh'll have tuh get someone else."

Red snorted. His mop of red hair bristled over his big-featured face as he tried to control himself.

"Listen," he said. "When we staked out that homestead on Coyote Springs last year and built a house on it, you knew we'd have to plow ground this year. The law says so. Now who's goin' to do it?"

No one answered him. Studiously they avoided his eyes. Carefully they looked everywhere but at Red.

He tried an appeal to their loyalty.

"Reckon you'd rather have Colonel Cultus or some nester from outside get his hooks on the only range water in ten miles?"

Still they didn't answer him. Water or no water they weren't having anything to do with a plow. Off in a darkened corner of the bunkhouse, Jumpy Hogarth, Red's wizened, good-natured little foreman was watching the play and grinning. Red's eyes fell on him and blazed.

"What the blazes you grinnin' at?" he barked.

He strode across the room and spat angrily at the pot-bellied stove. There was a satisfying hiss and spurt of steam. "By thunder," he said. "I never seen such a worthless, sick, no-account lot of cowherders in all my life. If I had the money I'd pay off to a man and hire a bunch of squaws!"

Red faced them now, his legs spraddled, telling them off, but secretly proud that they stood up to him. "Why," he continued, "if I had one good man I could—"

Suddenly he paused. His mouth stopped working his quid and a sly look came into his eyes as he turned them toward Jumpy.

The grin suddenly faded from Jumpy's face, to be succeeded by a look of consternation. "No, boss," Jumpy said quickly. "No. I got ramroddin' to do."

Red rubbed his hands together. "Slim can do the ramroddin'," he said complacently. "Won't be much to it because I got as fine a bunch of hands as ever forked leather. You'n me's goin' to plant us a couple of acres of alfalfa."

"But, boss," Jumpy said desperately. "How about Colonel Cultus? He ain't a goin' to like it."

A stubborn set hardened Red's jaws. When Red made up his mind, all the joints were welded. "But me no buts," he quoted unconsciously. "We're tossin' a plow and some grub in the wagon in the mornin' and headin' for Coyote Springs. The Colonel won't give us no trouble."

Jumpy looked doubtful.

"He figgered we was a flash in the pan last year," he said. "This time he'll know we're dead serious."

"Supposin' he does. What can he do about it?"

Jumpy shook his head. "You can't tell till you squeeze it which way a dill pickle will squirt," he said.

THEY were up early and on the road. Red felt fine. As usual, the promise of action buoyed his spirits. Inaction frayed his nerves and made him grouchy and hard to get along with. It was a beautiful spring morning, the sun bright and warm, with just a touch of breeze in the sage. A couple of fleecy drift clouds spotted a brilliantly blue sky.

"Purty, ain't it?" Red asked.

Jumpy gave the sky a brief, soured glance. He sat hunkered on the seat and the usually placid lines in his weathered face were all turned downward in disapproval.

"We'd better be keepin' an eye peeled for those Cup and Saucer riders," he said. "When they see this plow I figger hallelujah is due to pop."

Red snorted. "We'll have that alfalfa in before they know we're in the country. Besides, we got the government behind us."

"Then you better call out the troops," Jumpy said. "Because there's a Cup and Saucer man comin' over that rise right now."

The rider saw them at almost the same instant they saw him. He was ahead of them about a quarter of a mile, and pulled his mount up short. He watched them for a moment, then wheeled his horse up a slight draw, and with a last backward look, disappeared.

Red's brow drew together in a frown. "I'll be jiggered," he said. "I never knowed I was poison, before."

Jumpy's face bore a thoughtful, puzzled expression. "That was Lem Sturges on his dun mare," he said. "He's always been friendly like."

"Him bein' ahead of us, he couldn't see the plow in the wagon," Red was figuring it out. "And while me and the Colonel ain't exactly cow and hide close, it don't call for no snubbin' like that from one of his hands."

"Don't figger he's the bushwhackin' kind," Jumpy said. "But we better make sure."

Red nodded. He stopped the team and they got out and scrambled up a nearby

rise that gave them a good view of the country. Off to the southeast they saw Lem Sturges.

"He's leanin' forward and shovin' the breeze straight for the Cup and Saucer headquarters," Jumpy said. "And he ain't stoppin' to smell no sagebrushes."

Big Red's brows darkened and his jaw jutted forward.

"Aw, the heck with it," he said. "Let's get goin'."

Strictly a man of action, Red didn't like puzzles. He preferred to take things as they came. Nevertheless, the memory of the Cup and Saucer rider hightailing it straight for home nagged at him and made him irritable for the rest of the ride to the homestead claim.

Certainly he was in no mood for the sight that met his eyes when they approached Coyote Springs. The spring was one of those desert phenomenon peculiar to the country. The water bubbled cheerfully up out of nowhere and meandered optimistically out across its willow lined course until it sank sleepily in the warm sand.

It was located in a shallow swale in the sage that narrowed a half mile or so to the north into a rocklined neck a couple of hundred yards across. This neck, in turn, rose and merged into the higher country beyond.

In its widest part, the swale was perhaps a quarter mile across and it was here that Red had staked out his hundred and sixty. It included the spring which was the only available water for miles. Being near the tacitly understood border of Red's Tipsy T and Colonel Cultus' Cup and Saucer, it was used by the cattle of both spreads.

When the country was opened to homesteading, it had been the only desirable spot for settlement. Without saying anything to Colonel Cultus, his neighbor to the east, Red had promptly filed on the rights. He wasn't taking any chances. Without Coyote Springs the range wouldn't be worth the time it took to scratch a cat's back.

From several overheard remarks, Red suspicioned that the Colonel didn't exactly approve of his lone handed action. But the Colonel's disapproval only stiffened Red's stubbornness.

While a few courteous words might have settled the whole question amicably, neither Red nor the Colonel was the kind that liked to have his action questioned. The whole thing had the makings of a full-fledged range war.

And right now it looked as if hostilities had started. For when they came to the edge of the swale and looked down at the spring and at the spot where the house should have been, there was nothing there but a blackened pile of ashes.

RED'S jaw slackened and his mouth fell open. For a moment he was unable to grasp this turn of events. But explosive anger was never far beneath the surface in Red. Now it burst forth in a vivid torrent of cuss words.

"Colonel Cultus burned my house to the ground!" he exploded. "Why, that lowdown, ornery—" He went on to explore the colonel's doubtful ancestry, cast aspersions on the colonel's character, cussed out his hands and cattle.

Jumpy said nothing. Only his lips tightened and his gray squinting eyes searched the sage for sign of the Cultus riders. Red whipped the team into a run and soon they were at the spring and out of the wagon.

"Not a sign that means a thing," Red said. "The cattle got it so tromped down you couldn't read a track on a bet. But there ain't no doubt the Colonel did it."

"I figgered you was underratin' his sociability," Jumpy said. "I reckon this puts the kibosh on the homesteadin'?" he added hopefully, glancing at Red out of the corner of his eyes.

Red bristled. "Not on your life it don't," he growled. "I'll homestead this piece if it's the last thing I ever do."

"But the law says we got to have a house, and Colonel Cultus will burn them down as fast as we build them."

Red swung restlessly around the ruins and his eyes searched desperately for an idea. Finally they came to rest on the low rock cliffs at the throat of the swale to the north.

"By thunder we'll build a rock house," he announced. "Soon as we get that sagebrush pulled and you get the plowin' started, I'm ridin' back to town for some dynamite and cement. We'll blow enough rock off that cliff to make the doggondest house Cultus ever tried to set a match to!"

For a moment Jumpy appeared startled. Then the sour look on his face was replaced by a slow grin of admiration. He spat ceremoniously into the ashes of the house and rubbed the palms of his hands together.

"Let's go, boss," he said.

They pitched camp that night and in the morning went after the sagebrush. The cattle frequenting the water hole had most of it tramped down and killed out, so it only took them a couple of days to clean a sizeable patch of ground.

They had a light chain hooked on the doubletrees, and Red drove the team while Jumpy held one end of the chain and threw a half hitch over a sage brush. A quick pull and it was out and thrown on a pile to be burned.

They had that one figured out all right, because Red had cleared a spot for his corrals that way. But when it came to plowing, they had a little more difficulty.

When they had the cayuses hitched to the plow, it developed that neither Red nor Jumpy had ever done any plowing.

"I seen my daddy do it in Iowa," Red said. "There ain't nothin' to it. You just point the team where you want to go and giddap."

Jumpy got the team squared around and sighted critically between their ears. "I'd reckon that'd be about right," he said. "But how am I goin' to hang onto the handles and the reins at the same time?"

Red tipped his sombrero over his eyes and scratched the stiff hairs at the base of his neck.

"Seems to me he knotted the reins and hung them around his shoulders," he said. "Then he steered with one hand and plowed with the other."

"Supposin' the team bolts and drags me over the plow?"

Red grunted disdainfully. "You been ridin' horses so long you could straddle the plow and never touch a handle," he told the bowlegged Jumpy.

Jumpy drew a deep breath. "Giddap!" he said.

The team started. The plow skittered along the top of the ground. Jumpy gripped the handles hard, the plow twisted, shot off to one side and tipped over sideways. Jumpy hollered "Whoa!" tripped over the handles and fell headlong.

He got to his feet, dusted himself off and eyed the plow warily. "She threw me," he said.

Red had been watching the performance critically. "Next time pull the handles up," Red remarked sagely. "That'll set the shear into the ground."

Jumpy braced himself. There was more caution in his stance now. "Giddap!"

He heaved the handles up. The plow sank into the earth. The soil turned up over the moldboard and the plow kept going down. The team lunged into the harness as the drag became heavier. It was pulling them to a standstill.

"Bear down! Bear down!" Red yelled. "You're goin' to China!"

JUMPY threw his weight on the handles. The plow shot up out of the earth. Released from the load, the team fell forward, suddenly wresting the plow from Jumpy's grasp. The knotted lines kept dragging him forward, his feet tangled in the handles and he fell on his face again. When he got to his feet he was cussing in a slow, steady monotone.

Red was dancing around impatiently. "Give me that sodbuster," he said. "I'll do it myself."

Profiting by Jumpy's mistakes, he managed to keep the plow in the ground at a reasonably accurate level. But he was so busy with the plow that he forgot to watch where he was going until Jumpy's shout brought him to attention.

"Pull to the left!" Jumpy shouted. "You're cuttin' a circle."

Looking back, Red saw that his furrow had swung a wide arc to the right. Vaguely he remembered his father's furrows straight as a die across the cornfield.

"I'll take a sight on that Juniper," he said. "And head straight for it."

He found that was easier said than done. It kept him busy hauling on first one rein then another. When he got to the end of the field, not even an optimist like Red could call it straight. Nevertheless, he gazed at it proudly.

"I done it," he said with satisfaction.

He turned around and started back, turning the first furrow on itself. When he began the second round he ran into trouble. He couldn't keep the plow cutting the proper distance from the first furrow

to turn the soil over.

Jumpy had been studying the performance. "That off horse has got two feet in the furrow and two out," he said. "Comin' across the field he looked like a prairie dog couldn't make up his mind to go down his hole or up."

Red nodded. "Must be we got the clevis bolt in the wrong hole," he said.

Tinkering with this they didn't notice the two riders until their shadows fell across the double trees.

Red whirled. "Colonel Cultus!" he exploded. "You're the polecat burned my house down!"

Colonel Cultus and Lem Sturges sat their horses and eyed the plowmen disdainfully. The colonel wore a frock coat carefully brushed. He was all of sixty, but straight as a cavalryman in the saddle. He sported an immaculate goatee on a face that was proud and strong.

"I rode with Jeb Stuart, suh," he said. "There were a lot of damyankees had the same complaint."

Red sputtered. His hand darted downward where his gun should have been, then he remembered he had left it in camp when he started plowing. He looked foolish for a moment then drew himself up remembering the rock idea.

"You'll never burn another house of mine," he said significantly.

The Colonel nodded. "I hope it won't be necessary, suh," he said. "I don't consider it friendly to be homesteadin' in these parts."

A stubborn glint came into Red's eyes. "I'll homestead where I please," he said. "And you or anybody else can like it or be blowed!"

He glared at the colonel and the colonel glared back at him. Lem Sturges fished in his pocket for his tobacco, opened his prayer book and found he had no papers. Jumpy offered his. The two men moved warily. Any other time they would be friends but this was strictly business.

Colonel Cultus finally broke the silence. "I'm tellin' you, suh," he said. "If you plant a crop here I'll run a thousand head of cattle over it." He raised his eyes to gaze at the spot they had just cleared. "Furthermore," he continued. "I'll have you know I could run a straighter land furrow than that when I was fourteen yeahs old!"

Red's face purpled. He was so angry he couldn't speak and his mouth twisted wordlessly. The colonel and Sturges swung their mounts and rode back toward the Cup and Saucer.

All Red could say was, "I'll show him! I'll show him!"

When his anger had subsided into a grim determination he spoke to Jumpy. "I'm goin' to plow that field myself. You get into town and get that dynamite and cement. And buy up all the barbed wire you can lay your hands on. He'll not run cattle over any field of mine!"

NEXT morning, Jumpy left for town and for the next two days things went more smoothly for Red. He began to get the hang of the plow, and in spite of the blisters on his hands and feet, was beginning to find a positive pleasure in his task.

He liked to watch the fresh damp earth roll up over the moldboard and fall in neat rounded layers behind him. The weather remained perfect, neither too hot nor too cold. Looking back after a day's work, he felt a sense of accomplishment. He ate his beans with gusto and slept soundly. The threats of Colonel Cultus began to vaporize in the emptiness of the range.

Alone with his team and his plow, he felt a kinship with the nesters that spotted the country farther to the eastward. He was in a mellow, friendly mood the afternoon of the third day, and only had a few furrows left to finish the field. As he halted to breathe his horses, his plow uncovered a long earthworm and Red eyed its squirmings in speculation. "Be mighty fine bait if I had a fishpole and a crick with fish in it," he mused. In a kindly mood he stooped over to cover the wiggling creature with earth.

It was at this moment that a dozen bees seemed to sting him viciously. Almost simultaneously he heard the angry roar of a ten-gauge shotgun.

After that things happened with a dazed, jarring abruptness. The team bolted. The lines tightened around Red's shoulders and hauled him over the plow with irresistible force.

The plow shot out of the ground and bounced along, flopping over and beating at Red as he floundered helplessly. He

couldn't get loose from the lines and the wind was knocked out of him.

The hidden gunman kept up a barrage that continued to panic the team. Instinctively, they ran toward camp and when Red finally struggled loose, he staggered blindly toward his bedroll where he'd left his .45.

The shotgun man was behind a rock down the swale. Red cut loose a barrage and the hidden gunny answered. By now the range was too great for either of them to be effective. Red found shelter in a slight depression and dug in for a siege. The suddenness of the attack and the pounding he had taken, momentarily slowed his wits.

He had lain still for perhaps an hour when he saw dust rising over the edge of the swale. For a moment he thought it was reinforcements for his attacker, then the wagon came into sight and he saw that it was Jumpy with their barbed wire and dynamite.

He fired a warning shot and Jumpy stopped. But the shotgun man caught between the two of them, showed his wisdom. Red saw the brush wiggling down the swale and presently he heard the sound of hoofs. He got a brief glimpse of the rider as he hightailed it out of there toward the Cup and Saucer.

Red rehashed the attack for Jumpy. He was boiling mad again and his hindsides smarted like the devil. "I'd have gotten it even worse," he said. "But I was just stoopin' over for a fishworm."

Jumpy eyed his boss' perforated pants sympathetically. He took out his knife and tested the blade.

"Looks like he sure as a blazes fixed you up with a month's supply of sinkers," he said, significantly. "You won't be able to sit down for a week. It was only a light birdshot. Otherwise you're okay. I reckon Cultus was just tunin' you up."

"I'm puttin' in that alfalfa if it kills me," Red said, between howls.

PUT it in they did. They harrowed the ground, spread the seed by hand and harrowed it again. When it was finished they had a field to be proud of.

To prevent any further ambush, one of them kept watch as the other worked. It made a slow business. Jumpy wanted to get reinforcements from the ranch but Red vetoed the idea.

"We'll do it ourselves," he growled. "If those saddle-shiners was too good to plow, they ain't good enough to fight. Tomorrow we start fencin'."

But Jumpy came down from the lookout that evening shaking his head.

"Colonel Cultus and half a dozen of his men are roundin' up a herd to the north," he said. "I don't know what he's up to, but it could mean trouble."

A crease of a frown disturbed Red's brow. He buckled on his guns. "Let's take a gander," he said.

Back up on the rocks, Red saw what Jumpy meant. A couple of miles to the north a herd of several hundred cattle were milling under the watchful eye of half a dozen circling riders. Even as they watched, the riders started shoving the cattle toward the head of the draw that led down toward the spring. Alarm showed on Red's beefy face.

"He's goin' to stampede them down the draw," he blurted. "They'll spill out over our alfalfa field like a flood. There won't be enough seed left to sprout a window box."

Jumpy cursed. For once anger showed in his popeyes. "We got to stop them," he snapped.

Red's mind raced hopelessly. Two men against six and a stampeding herd of cattle.

"The dynamite!" His words burst out. He turned and started to run back toward camp. Jumpy followed him. Red jerked out his plan as he ran.

"It'll make hamburger out of a lot of good beef," Jumpy panted.

"To blazes with that," Red answered. "I'll head them off. Cultus won't get within rifle distance of those steers for a month."

Back in camp they pried open the box of dynamite. Jumpy got a handful. "How much?" he asked.

"Take a dozen sticks," Red said, grabbing a fistful. He looked at them impatiently, tossed them back. "Dammit, take the whole box!" Panting and sweating they lugged the dynamite up the draw.

"Must weigh a hundred pounds." Jumpy wheezed. "Ain't this far enough?"

Red surveyed their position quickly.

"Another hundred yards," he said. "We're almost on the homestead line and

be darned if I want a blast hole smack on my property."

They packed it another hundred and fifty yards and put it gingerly on the ground square in the middle of the draw. Red cut off a short fuse, shoved the end of it into a cap and crimped it hastily with his teeth. Jumpy had a stick slit and Red shoved the cap in it and laid the stick back in the box. Hardly was this preparation completed, when a sudden fusillade of gunfire accompanied by high pitched hazing yells was heard up the draw.

Soon they could hear the rumble of running cattle and the herd, a solid mass of frightened steers appeared on the skyline and bore down on them.

"Heaven help us if this don't stop them," Jumpy said in awe. "We'll be tromped into a couple of throw rugs."

They waited tensely while the cattle rolled downward. Jumpy struck a match and held it near the split end of the fuse.

"Now?" he asked. Red shook his head. He was judging the distance and speed of the oncoming herd. Jumpy glanced up nervously. "Now?" he faltered.

Red drew a deep breath. "Now!"

Jumpy shoved the match into the fuse. It sputtered and caught with a hiss.

"Now run!" Red yelped.

"Save your breath!" Jumpy was traveling.

"Get behind a rock!" Red yelled.

"What rock?" Jumpy asked. The walls of the draw were smooth and free of abutments. The sand floor was clean as a whistle. Red's heart sank.

"Then keep a runnin' and pray that fuse is longer than I think it is!"

GLANCING back fearfully, Red saw that the cattle were not more than a couple of hundred yards behind them and almost upon the box of dynamite. His backward glance proved costly. He caught his toe on some dead sagebrush and plowed his face into the sand.

Seeing his boss down, Jumpy whirled back to help him. At that moment the dynamite exploded. It went skyward with a tremendous roar. A huge cloud of dust and smoke mushroomed out of the draw. Small objects, rocks, pieces of sagebrush went flying through the air.

Caught off balance, Jumpy was knocked flat by the concussion.

They lay there gasping, the body of the herd obscured by the blast. A large irregular chunk of something came sailing end over end toward them. For a moment Red thought it was going to hit them, but it landed with a plop a few feet away.

Red saw that it was the hind quarter of a beef, neatly detached from the rest of the animal. It lay hide up, the brand plainly showing. It was the Tipsy T.

Red pointed a shaking finger. "That's my cow!" he howled. "He killed my cow! They were running Tipsy T stock!"

Jumpy grunted. "You better be worryin' about the rest of them." He was busy ducking small stones that pelted down on them.

They waited tensely, straining their eyes toward the smoke and dust to see if the remainder of the herd was coming.

But when the smoke raised they saw the draw had been cleared of cattle. There were only one or two dead beefs. The charge had gone off at just the right time. The herd was out on the prairie scattered to the winds. Off to the east, a group of riders was slowly moving back toward the Cup and Saucer.

"They could have wiped us out in a gun battle," Red said with satisfaction. "But I reckon we kind of got them upset for the time bein'."

"Sure blew a hole in the ground," Jumpy said. "She's fillin' up with water already."

"Yeah," Red said complacently. "That was a first rate blowout." Suddenly he straightened. "Did you say water?"

"Sure," Jumpy said. "She's runnin' a good stream."

Red came over and looked at it. The crater was already half full. A horrible suspicion began to form in his mind.

"Jumpy," he said, dragging the words out. "Take a run down and see if Coyote Springs is still flowin'."

Jumpy got the idea. He was back in a moment with an unbelieving expression on his face. He met Red's eyes. "She's dryin' up," he said.

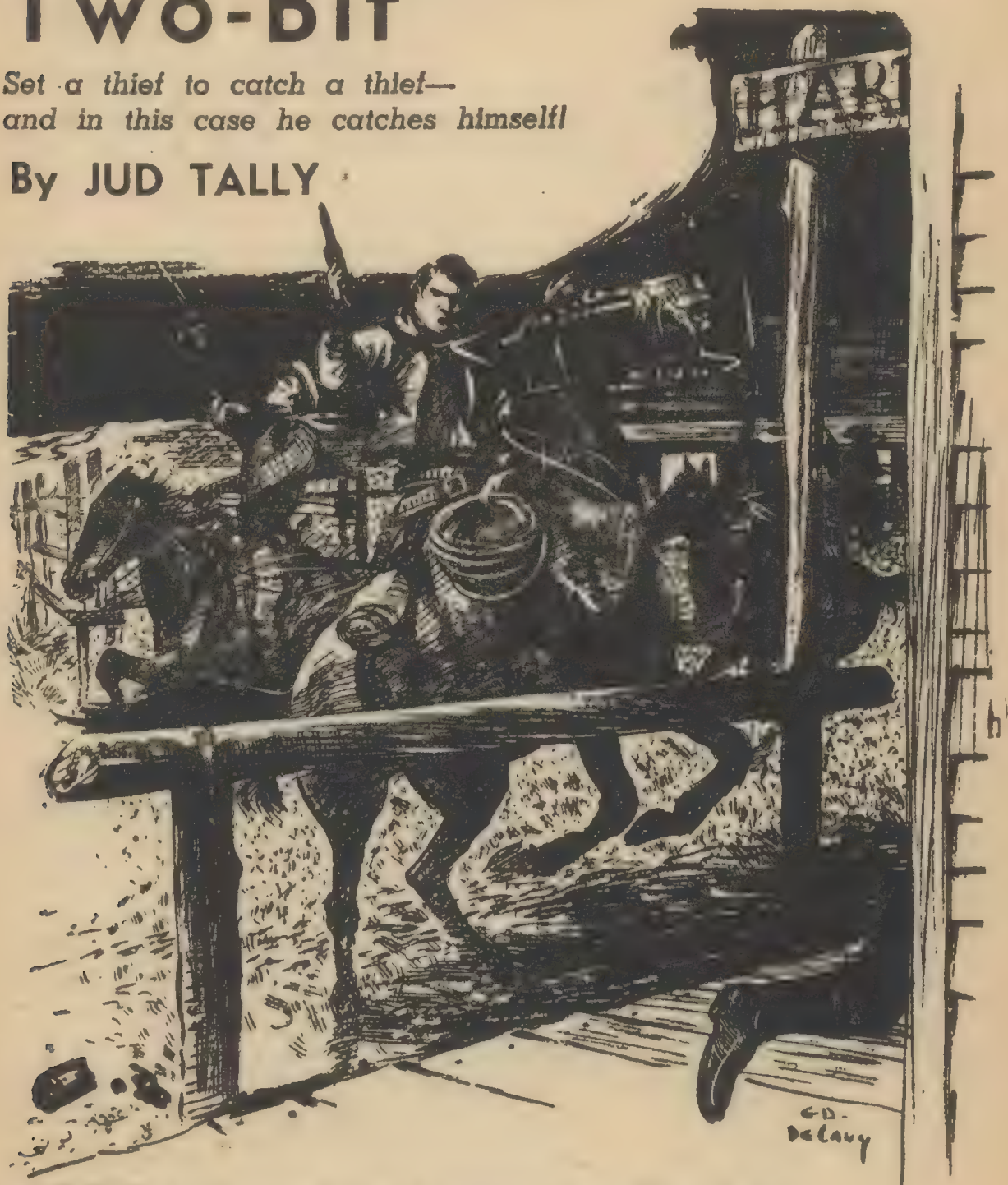
Red felt shock creeping through him. He sat down heavily on the shoulder of the dead cow.

"That blast done tapped the stream up here," he said. "It moved Coyote Springs plumb off my property. "Jumpy, we got to start in all over again!"

The Purification of Two-Bit

Set a thief to catch a thief—
and in this case he catches himself!

By JUD TALLY



IT WAS a good town, as far as a cowtown goes. Where it got the name of Two-Bit is lost somewhere back in history. It started out as a mining town but, as luck would have it, the location was close by the Chisholm Trail and only one-day's ride

back from the railroad terminal where the Trail ended.

Tall, lanky, stubborn and just-paid-off Texans found Two-Bit a mighty convenient spot to cut her wide and handsome. They usually rode into town in great clouds of dust, with high-pitched yippings and plenty of gun play.

Like all properly parched cowmen, they congregated in the saloons and dance halls which became an integral part of Two-Bit's prosperity. And before the evening was very old, the gun play started in earnest, with moving two-legged targets instead of just windows and clouds. It seemed that Texas waddies had their own opinions and would back them up with bullets. All in good clean fun, of course, but usually three or four men were stretched out on the pool tables at Bill Watkins' place while Doc Welsh drew the bullets and generally patched them up.

For a town suffering growing pains and already sporting several two-story brick buildings—one even rose to three stories—all this meant more money in the tills, but it gave the town a bad reputation.

To add to the troubles of the town fathers there was a bandit who preyed on the countryside, robbing anything from a stage to a lone traveler on foot. He operated beneath a mask, never uttered a word and lacked the glamour of any of his contemporaries. In fact, he didn't even have a name, and that was the grossest insult to the art of banditry. People just called him the "Bandit" and let it go at that.

Doc Welsh heard the most-recent pack of pleasure-bent waddies ride in. He put down a book on anatomy, went over to his instrument case and began stowing probes and scalpels into the old black bag he always carried.

He gave them an hour to get liquored up, half an hour to start the inevitable argument, and then he'd begin a busy evening. By the time the shooting began, Doc was walking slowly toward the pool hall and the green tables, which frequently turned red as he worked over some groaning waddy.

It wasn't much different tonight except that there were only two casualties. One from a bullet that creased a gun hand, another from a broken bottle. Doc Welsh patiently stitched the wounds, packed up his gear and let them sleep off the tumbler of whisky he insisted they imbibe before he began his work.

The meeting he had requested was already in session at the bank. Sam Alton, who owned the bank, let Doc in. All the merchants were there, and the town marshal, a deputy sheriff from the county seat, and John Bower, who held a big interest in all the cafes and dance halls.

Doc stepped to the head of the table, and without preamble addressed them all. They listened, because grizzled old Doc Welsh was wise and they knew it.

"It's time all this wildness was stopped," Doc said. "I've tried to stop it before but you'd have none of my plans. You, John Bower, because those hell-roaring waddies spend a lot of money. You, Sam Alton, because this money flows through your bank. I admit the stores profit, too. Those boys have ridden a long trail, are loaded with money and in a spending mood. But gentlemen—the Chisholm Trail won't exist in another year or so."

"Oh, nonsense," Bower derided. "Texas cattle have to get to market and they have to be driven north to meet the railroad, don't they?"

"Certainly," Doc replied, "but the railroad already has plans to head south and meet the Texas cattle. When that happens, the trail will be overgrown. It will vanish in six months—and what happens to Two-Bit then?"

Sam Alton stood up. "We're too big a town to go under just because those waddies stop coming here. There are hundreds of ranches near by, some mining in the hills with a promise of more. Two-Bit is built up and it will stay built up. Much as we all love and respect Doc Welsh, we know he's wrong this time. You better stick to mendin' your bullet holes and busted legs, Doc. Leave things like runnin' Two-Bit to us."

"I have left it to you and Two-Bit has gotten itself a reputation that's spread all the way East. My son Jeff even heard of it in Boston, and he's wondering what kind of a town he's coming back to. I've got to tell him. We have an epidemic of gunshot wounds. They outnumber anything else and keep getting worse instead of better."

"The boy is coming home soon, ain't he, Doc?" Sam Alton said. "That'll be a

big help to you. Doctors are hard to come by."

"In Two-Bit they are," Doc replied. "What doctor wants to spend his life mending bullet wounds? The reputation of this town scares them off, just like it scares away good and decent people who want to come here and live and grow and prosper. My boy is coming back only because I insist on it. He doesn't want to. That's how bad people think of Two-Bit."

MALVERN JONES, who ran the weekly paper, stood up and agreed with Doc.

"He's right as usual," Jones said. "When I file a news story, they don't ask me for names—just how many people got shot up today. And we've got another problem—that black-hearted scoundrel who robs our stages, our stores and even our homes. Marshal, don't you have any line on him yet?"

Rangy Pete Monroe polished the star pinned to his shirt. "It's somebody in town, that's a sure thing. But he picks his own time. When we're on the prowl for him, he stays home. When we relax, he goes out huntin'. Lately he took to gun-slingin' too, and he killed a man, so now it don't make much difference how many others he kills. But we'll get him, sooner or later."

Doc Welsh picked up his battered medical bag and jammed on his hat. "I take it then," he said, finality in his voice, "that you gentlemen intend to do nothing about promoting Two-Bit into a law-abiding and decent town fit for strangers to come and settle down in. All because of the profits those hell-raisers bring. Well, I'm through—and I'm going to bring peace to Two-Bit in my own way. Maybe it won't work, maybe it will. I'll know better what to do when my boy arrives on tomorrow morning's stage."

He stalked out into the night. A quartet of hard-riding waddies drowned him in dust and reawakened the town by trying to shoot down the sign above Eph Peck's general store. Doc strode briskly to his office, sat down and tried to think it out.

Maybe the others were right. Rake in the money while it lasted, and when the Chisholm Trail died and killed this hard-drinking traffic with it, then it would be time to do something else. Only, as Doc Welsh saw things, it would be too late then. Two-Bit was getting like Piote—too tough to attract settlers, too tough to keep its decent citizens.

Doc took out Jeff's last letter from a bottom drawer in his desk. He read it again and chuckled. The boy was clever. Perhaps he should have been a lawyer instead of a doctor.

Doc put the letter away. He blew out the lamp and went to the back of the house. He was half undressed when he heard more shots blast out in the night. Wearily, he put his clothes back on and went out. He knew he would be needed.

In the morning he was one of those who showed alarm when the stage rolled in at top speed and "Pop" Crowley, at the reins, started yelling before he checked the horses and pulled on the brake. Pop got down and a lone passenger climbed out.

The passenger was young—about twenty-two. He wore striped bell-bottomed trousers, a cutaway coat, and a heavy watch chain dangled from the vest pocket. His tie was wide and black against a wing collar, and set squarely on his head was a gray topper with a black band.

Doc Welsh hurried up to Pop Crowley. "Where is he?" Doc demanded. "Where's Jeff?"

Pop shifted his wad of tobacco. "Doc," he said, "ain't no sense tryin' to make it easy fer you. The boy is dead! An outlaw plugged him in the back fer no reason 'ceptin' the boy didn't have much money. Me an' Mr. Parker here buried him out past High Rock. We brung his stuff back."

The dudish-looking man stepped up to Doc and offered his hand. Doc took it in both his own. The dude said, "Howdy, Doc. Been hearing about you from Pop Crowley. I'm Len Parker, come here to open up a store and sell patent medicines, mostly. Seems like we ought to team up—if I stay."

"What about the boy? My boy Jeff?" Doc asked.

The crowd was getting thicker behind Doc. The dude shook his head and then solemnly removed his high hat.

"We got stuck up by this outlaw," he said. "Can't say what he looks like on

account of he wore a mask. He lined the boy up and started searching him. Jeff didn't like it and said so—and the outlaw shot him in the back. Then he got scared, I reckon, and went off without disturbin' anythin' else. The outlaw ought to hang!"

Doc turned away, head down until he was in the middle of the silent crowd. Then he raised his head and waved a hand for attention.

"You heard what happened to Jeff. Shot in the back! Jeff spent six years studying to be a doctor, to take my place. You can't get another doctor to come here, but I ain't aiming to leave. I'll stay, but from here on those of you who get shot in fights or horseplay can doctor your own wounds. I ain't patching up no more gunshots. It's shooting that drives this town crazy and I'm going to help put a stop to it! That's all I got to say."

Doc walked slowly back to his office. There he stood before the framed Oath of Hippocrates, read it carefully as if he didn't know it word for word. Then he turned the face of it to the wall.

"Hippocrates," he mumbled, "never heard tell of Two-Bit."

IT WAS two days later when Doc visited "Dude" Parker's store for the first time. He complimented him on it and then rode his buckboard out to the ranch of Elmer Twining, where one of the hands had gotten himself mixed up with a loco steer.

Twining made it his business to know about everything that went on. While Doc worked, Twining said:

"Saw that pack of Texans which shot up Two-Bit last year just ridin' in. From what I heard, every manjack of 'em is spoilin' fer trouble, and they don't like Two-Bit nohow. Me, I'm keepin' my boys on the ranch tonight."

"It's a good idea," Doc said. "Because if they get mixed up in a shooting and inhale any lead, I'm not digging it out of them. Everybody in town knows I refuse to treat bullet wounds now."

"We heard," Twining nodded. "You can be a stubborn galoot, Doc, but danged if I don't think you're right. They say that new dude storekeeper is takin' care of the boys who get shot up, but nobody has much faith in him. There's a heap o' difference between a regular doc like you and a storekeeper who sells pills. Yep, a heap o' difference."

Doc remembered that night, almost a year ago, when the hands from the Bar-Q branch of the Chiricahua cattle outfit started to clean out Two-Bit and got thrown out minus every dime they owned. They swore they'd be back and now they were. Concentrated lightning was going to blast loose before morning.

When it started, they didn't send for Doc. They brought "Pie-Eye" Logan to his office and dumped him on the examination table. There were four local men with him and each one held a drawn gun.

"Doc, Pie-Eye got hisself in front of a bullet," one man said. "We ain't bringin' him to the Dude on account of we think Pie-Eye deserves the best, and you being a regular doc are the best. So shuck that slug out'n him, Doc, and make him pretty again."

Doc didn't get up from his chair. "You boys know I don't treat gunshot wounds. Take him to the Dude. Take him anywhere, but if he stays here he'll die from loss of blood before I touch him."

Four guns came up to cover Doc. One man said, "Doc, if Pie-Eye should happen to cash in his checks, we ain't goin' to like that very much. Pie-Eye an' you might ride the same funeral percession side by side."

Doc laughed at them. "You wouldn't kill me. I've known you boys since you were kids. Two of you I brought into the world. Michael, I'm treating your wife right now. If I die what happens to her? And the rest of you—suppose you get the fever or bust a leg. The Dude can't take care of things like that. I ain't scared, and I still won't dig no bullets out of anybody. Now get him out of my office!"

There was no arguing Doc's points. They picked up Pie-Eye and carried him over to the Dude's store.

Late that night, Marshal Pete Monroe dropped in on Doc Welsh. He was dusty and tired.

"Well, the bad uns are gone," he said. "The Dude had to patch up four men tonight. I'm beginnin' to think you're right, Doc. We ought to put a stop to this—keep them waddies out. Sure, it means a lot of money lost to Two-Bit, but them herd drives will be thinnin' out next season and disappear before next year is

over. The railroad is headin' for Texas."

"Convince Sam Alton and John Bower of that," Doc sighed. "All they see is the gold that slides over their counters today. Tomorrow means nothing."

"The sheriff was to see me day before yesterday," Monroe said. "He's willin' to help, providin' we invite him in. But he ain't waitin' for no invite to round up that outlaw that dry-gulched your boy, Doc. The sheriff says he thinks the hombre behind that mask is Burt Ramsey."

"Ah," said Doc. "I been wondering about him. He always seems to have money right after a stickup. He's a bad one, Marshal. Go after him shooting."

"When I get enough evidence to hang him, I will," Monroe grunted. "How about it, Doc—if I get plugged do you patch me up?"

"Sure, Marshal. You're different. You do your shooting as part of your job."

MONROE rubbed his chin. "Doc, if Burt Ramsey is the outlaw who shot your boy in the back, maybe I can sort o' set him up for you. I remember you used to wear a gun in your day."

"The West was tough then." Doc closed his eyes, remembering the past. "A man who didn't carry hardware was a fool. But the West is changing now—all but Two-Bit. In a short while nobody will wear guns except lawmen. It's coming to that, and it can't come too soon to suit me."

"I reckon so—after what happened to Jeff," Monroe said. "Well, I'll be gettin' on. Just in case them waddies finish up the redeye they toted out of town and decide to come back for more."

"Thanks for dropping by," Doc said. "Oh, Marshal, what did you hear about Pie-Eye? They brought him in here with a bullet through his shoulder. I refused to remove it and they carried him to the Dude's."

"The Dude got it out, Doc. Hurt Pie-Eye some and he yelled like a steer with a busted tail, but he'll live."

"Good," Doc nodded. "I'm glad."

The marshal gently caressed the butts of his twin guns. "You know, Doc, sometimes I get to thinkin' you'd work on them shot-up boys if the Dude wasn't here. Well, so long, Doc. Be seein' you at Burt Ramsey's hangin'—if he's the outlaw who bushwhacked Jeff."

Doc sat back and did some heavy thinking before he went to bed. He had a feeling that things were about to happen. Tonight's rowdiness had just about ruined the lower end of the street optimistically named Broadway. Whatever profits flowed into Two-Bit were practically wiped out by the damage those waddies had inflicted.

The next day Doc found some more tangible results. Two sworn enemies had bumped into one another, drawn guns and then paused. Both knew that if either was wounded, there'd be no legitimate doctor to care for the wound. They talked it over, dropped their gun belts and fought it out barehanded in the street. Then they'd bought drinks for all, clasped hands and called the whole thing off. Nothing like that had ever happened in Two-Bit before.

That night, Doc himself rode out to meet a bunch of Trail waddies who had been reported heading for Two-Bit. They were already partly liquored, and they'd heard about the Bar-Q crowd being driven out of town in the past.

Doc stopped them by firing three shots into the air. He was immediately ringed by men who didn't care much if he was a doctor, a marshal or a platoon of troops.

"This is just a friendly warning, boys," Doc said. "You're welcome in Two-Bit. Your money is as good as the next man's. Maybe better, because you leave a lot of cash and don't take much with you except what's in your insides. I'm the local doctor. The *only* doctor. I refuse to treat any gunshot wounds or mend any holes in a man's skull made by a chair or a club. Fight if you want to, but don't come to me to save your lives."

"Well now, listen to the man," someone shouted. "I'm thinkin' what Two-Bit needs more'n anythin' else is a ex-doctor!"

"If we can pay up, you'll fix us up, Doc I'll bet," someone else called.

Then one very tall man swung down off his horse. Unstrapped chaps flapped like sails against his legs. He stepped close to Doc and thrust out a big hand.

"Howdy, Doc! Yuh remember me? Look a mite close—at them scars that busted bottle made. Yep, you shore fixed me up, Doc. Can't hardly see the marks

none. And you were as gentle as my Mother used to be when she fixed us up when we were kids. Doc, you want us to ride around and by-pass Two-Bit, then we ride!"

"But I don't," Doc explained. "You boys can have a lot of fun in Two-Bit. But don't go there gun-heeled. Check your weapons at the Widow Ralston's store. The Widow Ralston don't favor nobody. You walk down the street with empty holsters and there ain't a citizen of Two-Bit going to draw on you."

There was a quick council of war, a firm agreement, and Doc rode in with them. He watched while they checked their guns, trailed along and saw the stunned looks on the faces of the local gun-slingers and fighters. There were a few arguments, but not a shot was fired. Doc went home, well satisfied.

The word would pass along the Trail, and Texas cowhands would check their guns at the Widow Ralston's as a routine matter from now on. The enmities developed over the years and brought to a head by too much drinking and shooting, would subside. Doc had reason to be pleased, and yet he had a feeling that things weren't quite right.

DOC'S hunch was a good one. The lone outlaw struck again, at a small wagon train coming in from the hills. He killed one man, wounded another and got away with some gold. Doc watched posses ride out to read sign and track the outlaw. He saw Burt Ramsey riding with one of the posses.

Ramsey filled the bill as an outlaw. He rarely worked and was too lazy to earn an honest dollar. He had few friends, was a silent drinker, and had exhibited how fast he could draw and shoot on many occasions. A dangerous man, doubly so if he was ever trapped. Doc had an idea he'd soon find out, if Marshal Monroe did what he promised to do.

They brought Burt Ramsey back with a bullet crease alongside his neck. Marshal Monroe personally asked Doc to attend to the wound, because it was purely accidental.

"Some o' the boys got trigger-happy, Doc. They was shootin' at shadows and Burt here got winged a little. Guess you got no objection to treatin' a man who was wounded in an accident."

"Sit down, Burt." Doc motioned to a chair. "I'll fix that scratch. Did you see any sign of the outlaw?"

"Naw!" Burt Ramsey scoffed. "This is a big country. How yuh goin' to catch one man?"

Doc doused the wound with alcohol. "I'd like to catch him, Burt. He murdered my son—shot him in the back. He did it supposedly because Jeff didn't have much money. Well, that's not so, because Jeff was bringing back a *lot* of money. It never turned up in his possession. The outlaw got it!"

"Funny thing," Ramsey grunted. "That Dude was in the stage an' he wasn't robbed, and he must have been totin' plenty. He used cash to start up his store. You ever think about that, Doc?"

"Why should I?" Doc doused more antiseptic on Ramsey's neck. "Pop Crowley told the same story."

"An' Pop got hisself a brand-new Concord Stage," Ramsey said. "Musta cost a heap o' money, and stagin' to Two-Bit ain't never made rich men outa anybody."

Doc sat back and studied Ramsey for a moment. "You're trying to tell me that the Dude and Pop Crowley lied about the stickup. That they killed my son and took all that money. That the Dude used it to start his store and Pop bought himself a new stagecoach. I never thought about it that way, Burt."

"Things ain't always the way they look," Ramsey muttered.

"You sticking up for that outlaw?" Doc asked coldly.

"I ain't stickin' up fer nobody. All I say is, yuh got to figger both sides o' this. Yuh finished, Doc, I'll be on my way."

"Sure, Burt. You're all right now. Just a crease that'll give you a stiff neck for a few days."

Marshal Monroe must have been hiding outside somewhere, because half a minute after Ramsey left the Marshal came in. He was grinning from ear to ear.

"Did I do a good job on that hombre, Doc? Maybe I shoulda put one through his head 'stead o' just creasin' him."

"You did it exactly right," Doc said. "I wanted Ramsey here so I could talk to him. I hope he doesn't know who fired that shot."

"We was ridin' fast an' hard. I pumped a few through the mesquite and the other boys got nervous and started shootin' too. That's when I threw one at Burt. He was fit to be tied, Doc, but he don't suspect it wasn't nuthin' but an accident."

"Good, Marshal! Everything is fine."

"Yuh think, Doc, maybe he's the outlaw?"

"I'm not sure, but if he is, we'll know it before long."

Doc sat up late that night, until the oil in the lamp ran low. Things were changing in Two-Bit. They'd be gunfights still, but not so many and gradually the boys would see that he was right. In a matter of weeks the word would go out that Two-Bit was tamed, and settlers would flock here because it was a natural location for a big city.

Murdering outlaws could frighten some people away, especially, women folk and Two-Bit needed women folk more than anything else. What started out to be simply a plan to tame Two-Bit had now become a scheme to rid the area of that outlaw. If he wasn't stopped in his tracks soon, he'd attract others of his kind until the hills and the prairie would be full of them.

DOC WOKE up with the sun. He had a long ride ahead of him and the buckboard was too slow and clumsy over the trails and too tiring. He swung into the saddle of a fast horse and set out for the Littleton spread.

Figuring things as closely as possible, he thought it was about time for the Littleton ranchhouse to have its annual addition. This would make it an even dozen, he chuckled, and it brought home the fact that he was getting old. The first Littleton child had been born eighteen years ago on that ranch.

Doc had been in practice at Two-Bit for several months prior, and before that he'd had a good practice back in Boston. The pioneering instinct brought him to the wilderness that had been Two-Bit, but he'd never regretted his decision to settle down here.

Still, personal satisfaction didn't change the fact that he was getting on in years. But he thrust the thought from his mind, raised his voice in a cracked, absolutely tuneless song and rode easily over the trail north.

He had to spend twenty-four hours on the Littleton ranch. The latest addition proved slightly reluctant about coming into the world. Doc, tired and thinking of the long ride back to town, gratefully drank coffee and arranged that a steer be shipped to town on Littleton's next visit. Doc had accepted worse fees.

He didn't hurry his mount along on the way back. He was content with the jogging pace and he half slept in the saddle. That horse of his could find its way home from any direction.

Doc saw the stagecoach about mid-afternoon. It was off the trail and being slowly dragged behind the horses, which were leisurely feeding on tall grass. Doc touched spurs to his horse and sped toward the coach.

He found Pop Crowley inside, more dead than alive. His face and torso were one great welt of raw flesh and dried blood. Doc opened a bottle of whisky and got some of it down Pop's throat.

"What happened?" Doc asked. "Pop, who used a quirt on you like this?"

Pop weakly guided Doc's hand and the bottle back to his lips. He took another long pull and then struggled into a sitting position.

"It was that blamed outlaw," he managed. "I was ridin' alone when he stopped me. Tied me to the coach wheel and started usin' his quirt. Said I'd helped shoot your son and that the Dude was workin' with me. That we took Jeff's money and out of it I got me this new stage and the Dude set himself up in business."

"Yes," Doc said, "I was afraid of that. What did you tell him, Pop?"

"The truth," Pop replied. "You ever been lashed with a quirt until you feel like dyin' would be welcome? Doc, it ain't easy to take. I had to tell him the truth. He wouldn't have believed anythin' else."

"I'll help you back on the seat and get the stage on the trail," Doc said. "You're able to take her in now."

"Doc, what you aimin' to do?" Pop asked.

"Ride back to town. When I get there —I don't know. I honestly don't know, Pop. Looks like things are backfiring on us."

"It was a risky business right off," Pop said. "Sounded good and worked some, but that outlaw could spoil it all."

Doc left the bottle with Pop in case he needed another drink. Then he rode off as fast as his horse could travel. There wasn't much time to lay plans. What had to be done must be done quickly. Killers don't wait—and if that outlaw was black-hearted, fiery-tempered Burt Ramsey, there'd be shooting in Two-Bit that wouldn't require the services of a doctor afterwards.

Doc left his horse at the stable, walked to his office and promptly turned the framed Oath of Hippocrates face out again. He sat down, tapped his desk with nervous fingertips for a few moments. It was getting dark. There'd hardly be much time left.

GOING back into the house proper, Doc pulled open a bureau drawer and took out the old six-gun he'd worn when a doctor sometimes had to convince Indians and roving bands of outlaws that a patient needed him. He stuffed cartridges into the gun, snapped the cylinder in place and then buckled on the gun belt.

He tied the holster down to his right thigh, slid the gun into it and practiced drawing. He smiled grimly. He was as rusty as if he had never pulled iron before. He kept trying, working to improve the draw, but it was no use. He never had been good at it. He wouldn't even clear leather by the time a polished gun artist would be shooting.

Doc tried something else. He dropped his hand to the gun butt, and without pulling the gun tipped the barrel and holster upwards as if shooting with a still-holstered gun. That seemed to work a little better. Anything would have been better than a deliberate draw. Doc felt about ninety as he put on his hat and walked slowly out of the office.

Lights were slowly coming on in the town and signs of its night life beginning to take shape. Doc liked it here. He'd never be sorry he came, no matter what happened tonight. Two-Bit was his town. It was growing old with him, though Two-Bit still possessed a lustiness that wouldn't depart for years—a youthful spring and tension that Doc knew only as a thing of the past.

And it wasn't just a saloon town. There were many other things here. People were becoming style conscious thanks to the stores and the mail-order catalogues. Two new churches had gone up within the last eighteen months and there was talk of others. The streets were coming up out of the mud, and the broken-down wooden planks that served as sidewalks were being replaced. There were more and more children to be seen and heard at their games—and above all it would be the children who'd make Two-Bit.

Doc felt good about it all. His chest expanded, his eyes shone softly in satisfaction. He'd been a part of this—an integral part. It might end at any moment now, but he was content. He was glad he'd looked the town over once again before he went to do what must be done. Knowing that Two-Bit's future was far more assured than its past had been took away some of the deadness in his muscles and put a little spring in them.

He passed the Dude's store and glanced in the window. The Dude was busy putting bottles of medicine on his shelves. Doc kept on going. Fifty yards further along the street, he saw Burt Ramsey. The man was wearing two guns, securely tied down. He walked with firm, purposeful steps.

Once or twice he looked behind him to see if he was being watched. Doc had already moved into the darkened doorway of the bank. Ramsey came on, increasing his speed as if he wanted to get something over with. When he was within thirty paces of the bank, Doc stepped out.

Ramsey came to a quick stop, hands poised above his guns. He squinted into the darkness and finally made out Doc's features.

"Hello, Doc," he said. "Somethin' wrong?"

"Not with me," Doc replied. "You're the wrong 'un, Burt. You danged near lashed Pop Crowley to death. Now you're aiming to shoot up the Dude. Easy work, Burt, because you know the Dude has been East for years and if he ever knew how to use a gun, he'd be rusty now."

"Get outa my way, Doc," Ramsey said.

"No," Doc said grimly. "I guessed sometime ago you were the outlaw, Burt. I've been sure of it lately. Your only pro-

tection is the fact that nobody knows who you are. But I do. You'll have to kill me, too. Draw any time you like, Burt. Any time at all!"

Ramsey froze. Doc started walking toward him. There was light coming from a second-floor window and it shone down on the bandit like a weak spotlight. The muscles in his jaws were working, a vein throbbed in his neck. He was crouched over, hands just above gun butts. His eyes were blazing pools of rage.

"Come on, Doc," he said softly. "Come real close so I can blast yuh! Old man, that's what yuh are! Old an' dyin'. Awful close to dyin' an' there ain't no medicine can do yuh any good!"

Doc came to a stop. He eyed the bandit carefully. His hand was already an inch from the butt of his gun. Ramsey ignored that. Doc knew Ramsey was thinking he could draw and shoot with plenty of time to spare before an old, gray-haired doctor could clear leather.

"I'm goin' to kill yuh, Doc," Ramsey went on. "Then I'm goin' in that store and kill the Dude. By the time anybody gets here I'll be runnin' this way too, an' I'll say I saw the outlaw ridin' away."

Doc said nothing. His eyes never shifted and Ramsey suddenly felt himself break out in a cold sweat. Doc should have said something but he just stood there, hand near his gun, eyes never wavering.

Ramsey couldn't stand that. He screamed an oath and drew. Doc tilted the holster upwards and shot Ramsey through the chest.

The slug sent the outlaw reeling backwards and he fell heavily, writhing and groaning in the dust.

DUDE came out in a hurry, a gun in his fist. Marshal Monroe and practically everyone else in town jammed into the pool hall later and watched Doc work over Ramsey, who was still breathing.

"Doggone it, Dad, we never figured on cleaning up a gun-slinging outlaw," the Dude said. "It was just the *town* we were going to purify!"

Banker Sam Alton pushed his way closer to Dude. "What did you say, Parker? Did I hear you call Doc 'Dad'?"

"Of course I did. My name isn't Parker," the Dude said. "I'm Jeff—Doc's son. We planned things so it would look like I'd been killed by this outlaw. Doc would take it hard and announce he'd treat no more gunshot wounds. My having been killed gave him a reason for refusing to patch up wounded men.

"That part of it worked," he continued. "Two-Bit tamed down. But Doc never figured on leaving anybody to die. He hinted I could handle some of the work, and the wounded men came to me. I treated them. I drew the bullets because I'm a doctor, too. But I did it clumsy enough so nobody guessed."

"And that story of the outlaw shooting Doc's son in the back was just made up?" Alton demanded.

"Yes," the Dude said. "I'd been away from here a long time. I grew up and naturally my appearance changed. Nobody would recognize me. Dad wrote and told me his plan. Two-Bit needed purifying and there was only one way to do it —his way. Make it look like gun-slingers who got shot might die for lack of care. That scared 'em."

"But Burt Ramsey here—" Alton still looked puzzled.

Doc raised his head. "Seeing as how Burt Ramsey was the outlaw, he knew he was being blamed for something he didn't do. And I put a flea in his ear that got him madder'n a starved coyote. Told him Pop Crowley bought himself a new stage and the Dude seemed to have plenty of money and that my son was carrying lots of cash. Ramsey figured they dry-gulched my son, took his money and put the blame on him."

"Is he going to die, Doc?" Marshal Monroe asked.

"Nope. Not with Young Doc and Old Doc working to save him," Doc replied. "Ramsey caught up with Pop Crowley aand lashed him into telling the truth. Then Ramsey realized he'd fallen into a trap. The only way out was to shoot everybody concerned, and he set out to make Jeff the first victim of his guns. I stopped him—by plain luck."

"I been wonderin' about that," the marshal said. "Ain't many as fast as Ramsey on the draw. An' you never won no prizes for fast shootin'."

"I didn't draw." Doc laid down a roll of bandage. "I shot without drawing be-

cause there was no other way. Even so, we were equally matched, because Ramsey was pure lightning. Only thing saved me was my anatomy books."

"What's a book got to do with gun shootin'?" the marshal demanded.

"You watch a man's jaw muscles, his neck muscles and the twitching of nerves," Doc said. "You watch his pulse in the big veins—and when they all begin moving at once, he's ready to draw."

"But he won't die on us, Doc?" the marshal asked again. "I want him for hangin'."

"He'll live," Doc said. Then, "All right, son. There's Ramsey's money belt over there. Take out our fee. We're in business fixing gunshot wounds again."

"What'll I take, Dad? Eight bits?"

"Two dollars," Doc said stoutly. Then he grinned. "Danged if maybe there ain't a future in this!"

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 9)

on duty at the store he spent his leisure hours in the saddle, riding dangerous Indian trails around the Pecos country and up the Rio Hondo Valley.

He was so relentless in the pursuit of Indian horse thieves that while at one time he had as many as 1500 good horses, the Indians detoured around his place in their raids. They feared the hard-riding, straight-shooting Kentuckian, but others suffered. One cold December day Apache Indians from the Mescalero Reservation came through Dark Canyon to Horsehead, crossing south of what is now Carlsbad, New Mexico, and skulked on the trail of little Sally Chisum and her father and brothers who rode with cowboy escort up the Pecos to the John Chisum Jinglebob Ranch. They lifted the locked corral gates from the hinges on the Christmas eve night of their arrival, and stole every one of the wagon horses and the ones they drove from their Texas home range.

The Secret Cave

Young Bonney had ferreted out every hiding place of Indian horse thieves except one. There was one cave that he had never discovered and it was a secret get-away cave for the Indians at least on one occasion.

Mescalero Apaches stole a bunch of horses from the ranching country northeast of the reservation. The soldiers at Fort Stanton were notified and soon located the raiders driving the horses and a wild chase began with the Indians turning the horses and heading north. They traveled a well worn trail to the entrance of a cave east of Fort Stanton, and into this cave the Indians with the stolen horses disappeared.

The soldiers, not wanting to follow the Indians into the cave where they might be at their mercy, sat all night at the cave entrance thinking they would remain until the holed-up Indians grew tired or were starved out. Meantime the raiders had gone through the cave and out through a secret entrance or exit on the other side of the mountain.

Even after the capture of the rampaging Geronimo, when the country was supposed to be peaceful, raiding bands of Apaches would escape from the reservation and make damaging raids before being recaptured and returned to the reservation.

Mr. Bonney relates one incident where a woman's nerve and quick thinking saved her from at least serious injury and perhaps saved her own and her baby's life. This woman was Mrs. Joseph Lea, wife of Bonney's mercantile partner Captain Joseph Lea.

Her husband was absent from home a short while after dusk one evening and while she sat rocking her baby to sleep a fierce old Apache warrior in war paint and feathers suddenly appeared in the room. The brave woman, while she nearly fainted through fright, did not scream or otherwise display her fear, but as calmly as possible bade the Indian step outside and wait for her husband who would be back to the house in a minute. This scared the Indian, who thought if the husband was that close it was time for him to be elsewhere. He left hurriedly and it was hours before Joseph Lea came home.

A Horse Thief Trail

One of the last bands of Indian horse thieves that Bonney helped to capture was a band which a Captain Scott, from Fort

Stanton, started to pursue after they had stolen quite a number of fine horses. Bonney joined Scott in the chase, and the first thing that Bonney did was to protest against the blowing of the bugle and all the racket connected with the giving of orders to the soldiers by the Captain. Bonney told the Captain that all the racket would scare the Indians out of the country by advertising the advance of the soldiers.

Bonney picked up the trail and it was followed just as fast as fresh horses could carry the men. After a long ride the pursuers came within sight of the Indians and when the savages saw that they would be overtaken and had no chance to escape, they stopped and dismounted.

The scout noticed that there was a somewhat peculiar movement or commotion among the Indians and the horses, but at the distance could not tell just what was the cause. Upon getting close enough to the group of horse thieves, the soldiers drew their guns and trained them upon the most vicious looking ones and commanded them to throw down whatever weapons they possessed.

While Captain Scott dismounted and walked toward the leader of the raiders, Bonney noticed an ugly looking buck over to one side of the group and just as the buck aimed his rifle at the Captain, Bonney fired, splintering the rifle in the hands of the Indian and the shattered rifle fell to the ground.

The Captain had had a close call, but he continued on to the leader, placed the Indians under arrest, and the soldiers then proceeded to start to take charge of the stolen horses when they found that most of the horses had been stabbed and were slowly bleeding to death, the Indians having stabbed the horses out of the pure determination not to give back anything that was of value.

Pecos Valley Wedding

C. D. Bonney also found romance in the Pecos Valley. He fell in love with and married Miss Sara Lund, who was the teacher in Roswell's first village school. During their courtship she had repeatedly begged him to quit the Indian scouting, he having already done more than his part toward ridding the country of Indian horsethieves, so he thought it appropriate to use the last government payment that he received with which to buy the wedding ring. Mrs. Bonney became one of the leaders of educational club organizations in Roswell. She was one of the three founders of the fast-becoming famous Roswell Museum Art Center.

It is doubtful if the West ever had a more colorful wedding than the Bonney-Lund wedding. Miss Lund rode horseback from her place of residence in White Oaks to her school, and her residence was the home of the famous sheriff Pat Garrett, who killed Billy the Kid. Pat Garrett served as best man at the wedding.

With extensive real estate deals and developments that have made him very wealthy, C. D. Bonney has for a number of years taken life easy enjoying the fruits of his labors in helping to build and develop a section of country that he claims is the grandest of places in which to live. All the trials, the hardships and the dangers through which he passed are now but a memory. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

LIFE for every man is a fight for freedom, freedom from want, freedom from fear and from oppression—or to put it more positively, freedom to be himself, to do, say, think and feel the things that his inborn and acquired drives make it necessary for him to do, say, think and feel in order to really live and to be productive. Though we are often prevented by outside forces from exercising our right to be free, basically freedom is the knowledge that all our inner forces are unchained and integrated and can function with no inner interference. Shakespeare worded the idea perfectly for all time when he wrote, *It is not in the stars, dear Brutus, but in ourselves that we are underlings.*

In this sense, as in every other, freedom is a relative thing. Freedom in the individual ranges from abject slavery to the condition of those rare and fortunate men who are so free in themselves that the matter of earning a living is of minor importance and easily dealt with. Such men having an abundance of unused free energy and having the normal concern of the mature man in the welfare of all other humans, are likely to turn to helping the less lucky to attain the freedom that is already theirs.

Such a man is Wayne Morgan, the fear-

less, black-caped Masked Rider of the range, and only in such a way is it possible to account for what to many may seem to be his inexplicable desire to risk his life in the defense of the underdog, the downtrodden, the oppressed and the ineffectual. Some might call him a meddling "do-gooder"—but he is actually a man with such an extra abundance of love for all humanity, with such a reverence for life simply because it is life, that he is incapable of seeing other people in trouble without going to their aid. And what such a man does, he does with his whole heart—for him no time is too soon to start, no cost too great to pay and no life too important to risk in the cause of freedom.

It was not long after Wayne Morgan and his Apache friend, Blue Hawk, had saved the Maldonado Rancho and a whole range full of small ranchers from the machinations of a power-mad grass hog, that resting up and wandering through the country, they found themselves sitting—at separate tables for a precautionary measure—in a ramshackle eating and drinking place at a crossroads where two stage lines intersected in the middle of the flat cow-country.

A man named Ab Pender, slouched over the bar, his tongue well lubricated by redeye was saying, "Yep, sure made a nice profit on that herd I pushed through to the rail point at Troro. Lost a few critters in the quicksand at Hopper Crick. But when I hit Troro I got top price. Yup, buy the house a drink on me, barkeep."

The bar boss passed around the drinks to the tables and came back behind the counter. The tall rangy-shouldered hombre with the blue eyes and the black hair eating at a table off from the bar had refused. His eyes flicked from Pender to the trio at the front of the bar counter. Two of the trio were small, pointed-jawed men, brothers maybe. The one in the middle was a big brute, sombrero pushed back and red hair straggling over his forehead. All three were well-dressed, toting a pair of hoglegs each, the holster tips tied down. They had gun passer stamped on them, and they were taking in Pender's every word.

"And I sure was slicker 'n slobbers! No checks for me," Pender went on boastfully. "Demanded cash and I got it." He slapped the left side of his white leather vest. "Right smack on me."

The blue-eyed man at the table cut his eyes quickly to the three at the bar again. That time their eyes did jump openly to Pender to see where he indicated he was carrying the money. The big redhead nudged one of the others. They both smiled.

"Mr. Pender," and the bar boss, "you're sure taking a—"

"Chance? Shucks, no," Pender broke in, raking his now unkempt gray hair. "Bracken, my segundo's with me. Be along in a minute."

"Ridin' them trails at night is plumb bad business," the bar boss advised, pouring him a free drink. "Just less'n two weeks ago Dockerty was robbed and afterwards they—"

"Ain't aiming to ride none at night," Pender broke in.

At the table, the wide-shouldered, blue-eyed man dropped a hand down to where he could grab one of these .45s pronto in case of trouble.

Pender went on. "I'll reach Henryville before nightfall today. Bracken's swinging up north to see some relatives. Me, I'll stay at the boarding house, then push on to Swellfork, come morning, in the daylight."

The barkeep swiped at a big fly with his bar rag. "Still ain't wise, Mr. Pender. You got enemies up there in the El Toro Negro country."

"Ready to hit the leather, boss?" called Bracken, a sawed-off tobacco-chewing figure, from the doorway.

"Let me down this drink, Brack." He dumped it, then faced the bartender a moment. "Yep, I got enemies, folks who claim I got an owlhoot bunch a-riding in my hire. They say I lend money on short-term notes. Then this bunch raids the man's outfit, runs off his cow critters, burns his hay and the like so he'll be in trouble and can't pay. Then I foreclose or take over outright, depending on the terms of the note. Well, it's all dang lies!"

He wacked the bar with the palm of his hand. "I lend 'em dinero for less interest than the bank—on collateral the bank won't take. And I ain't got no raidin' lobos in my hire."

His voice went crescendo. He turned on his heel and strode out the door. A few moments later Pender and Bracken passed the front window, riding eastward up the trail.

"Somebody'll be using a cutter on old

Pender yet, and right soon—from behind, too, I reckon," the barkeep told the room.

The tall black-haired man, having his second cup of java at the table, looked casually toward the rear of the place. His eyes drifted over the impassive-faced Indian also having chow, back near the rear wall. No signal seemed to pass between them.

Half a minute later, Frank, the bartender, lowered a shot glass he'd just emptied, patted his bulging front, and exclaimed with goggling eyes, "Hey, where'd that Injun go to? He was there a minute ago. Now—like a danged ghost—" He left the bar and went to the back table. "By grab, he's left a whole dollar here for the grub, anyways!"

Up at his table, the dark-haired man smiled faintly behind the smoke of his quirly. Moments before he'd caught the thud of the Indian's pony moving along the road after Ab Pender and his segundo.

The trio up at the front of the six-foot bar, the two pint-sized brothers and the red-headed big bull of an hombre, were con-

[*Turn page*]

America's Most

ENTERTAINING

Picture Magazine!

NOW ON SALE AT ALL STANDS
ONLY 15c PER COPY

AUDELS Carpenters and Builders Guides 4 vols. $6

Inside Trade Information for Carpenters, Builders, Joiners, Building Mechanics and all Woodworkers. These Guides give you the short-cut instructions that you want—including new methods, ideas, solutions, plans, systems and money saving suggestions. An easy progressive course for the apprentice and student. A practical daily helper and Quick Reference for the master worker. Carpenters everywhere are using these Guides as a Helping Hand to Easier Work, Better Work and Better Pay. To get this assistance for yourself, simply fill in and mail the FREE COUPON below.

Inside Trade Information On:

How to use the steel square—How to file and set saws—How to build furniture—How to use a mitre box—How to use the chalk line—How to use rules and scales—How to make joints—Carpenters arithmetic—Solving mensuration problems—Estimating strength of timbers—How to set girders and sills—How to frame houses and roofs—How to estimate costs—How to build houses, barns, garages, bungalows, etc.—How to read and draw plans—Drawing up specifications—How to excavate—How to use settings 12, 13 and 17 on the steel square—How to build hoists and scaffolds—skylights—How to build stairs—How to put on interior trim—How to hang doors—How to lath—lay floors—How to paint

AUDEL, Publishers, 49 W. 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

Mail Audels Carpenters and Builders Guides, 4 vols., on 7 days free trial. If OK I will remit $1 in 7 days and $1 monthly until $6 is paid. Otherwise I will return them. No obligation unless I am satisfied.

Name_____

Address_____

Occupation_____

Employed by_____ THR

THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

YOU CAN influence others with your thinking! Learn to impress others favorably—*get across your ideas.* Let the Rosicrucians show you how to use the power of mind. For *free book* write Scribe R.L.L.

The ROSICRUCIANS (AMORC)
San Jose, California

BE A DETECTIVE

WORK HOME or TRAVEL. Experience unnecessary. DETECTIVE Particulars FREE. Write GEO. T. H. WAGNER, 125 W. 86th St., N. Y.

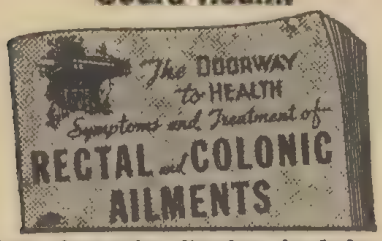
for selling 100 boxes greeting cards at $1. Stationery or napkins with name on. Send for selling plan & samples on approval. Costs nothing to try. MERIT, 370 PLANE ST., DEPT. 20 NEWARK 2, N. J.

SHORTHAND in 6 Weeks at Home

Famous Speedwriting system. No signs; no symbols; no machines; uses ABC's. Easy to learn; easy to write and transcribe. Fast preparation for a job. Low cost. 100,000 taught by mail. For business and Civil Service. Also typing. 27th year. Write for free booklet. SPEEDWRITING, Dept. 9006-A, 55 W. 42nd St., New York 18

Dangers Of Delay On Chronic Ailments

FREE BOOK — Tells How To Help Guard Health



Many facts about colon disorders, headaches, constipation, nervousness or stomach, liver and bladder conditions are explained in a new 40-page FREE BOOK. Write today. Thornton & Minor Clinic, Suite 656, 911 E. Linwood, Kansas City 3, Mo.

DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men.

In Business Since 1909
300,000 Satisfied Customers
THE NEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.

FREE BOOK

Your Horoscope for Each Day this month in EVERYDAY ASTROLOGY — 25c per copy!

FREE BOOK

RAISE HAMSTERS

The new wonder animals from Syria. Often called Toy Bears. Delightful pets. Everyone wants them. Laboratories need thousands. Clean, odorless. Raise anywhere. A profitable and interesting hobby or business. We furnish breeders and instructions. Write today for free book.
GULF HAMSTERY, 1537 BASIL ST., MOBILE, ALA.

NERVOUS STOMACH

ALLIMIN relieves distressing symptoms of "nervous stomach"—heaviness after meals, belching, bloating and colic due to gas. ALLIMIN has been scientifically tested by doctors and found highly effective. World famous—more than a ¼ billion sold to date. At all drug stores.

ALLIMIN Garlic Tablets

RUPTURED?

Get Relief This Proven Way

Why try to worry along with trusses that gouge your flesh—press heavily on hips and spine—enlarge opening—fail to hold rupture? You need the Cluthe. No leg-straps or cutting belts. Automatic adjustable pad holds at real opening—follows every body movement with instant increased support in case of strain. Cannot slip whether at work or play. Light. Waterproof. Can be worn in bath. Send for amazing FREE book, "Advice To Ruptured," and details of liberal truthful 60-day trial offer. Also endorsements from grateful users in your neighborhood. Write:

Cluthe Sons, Dept. 33, Bloomfield, New Jersey

fabing excitedly in whispers. "All right," one of the little beady-eyed gents said. "One more shot of tonsil tonic, man—"

The redhead clamped a huge hand around the back of his neck and wheeled him around to the front door. "Business afore likker, Willie! When we work this one, you'll be able to stay orey-eyed for months." They moved out and around to the hitchrail under a cottonwood beside the place. They swung into saddle.

The black-haired hombre with the blue eyes had risen and could see them through a side window. He watched them whirl their cayuses and ride at a high lope up the stage road that ran to the east and Henryville. Yet when they had arrived, they had come from the east. The blue eyes of Wayne Morgan took on a hard gold glint, big lithe body tightening a moment.

Sensing skulduggery in the attitude of the three who had left the saloon, and range-wrecking machinations in the whole affair, Morgan had sent Blue Hawk on ahead, and himself would soon be on the heels of the ill-favored trio. But if he had known of the confusion and danger that lay on the trail, of the substitute Masked Riders trying to take advantage of his reputation, of the war and grief to come, even he might have hesitated a moment before plunging into what author W. T. Ford has made into one of the liveliest Masked Rider novels to date. It's called BLACK SHADOW TRAIL, and will be out in the next MASKED RIDER WESTERN. Don't let this one get by you. It's a rip-snorting humdinger of an action yarn, start to finish!

In addition there will be the usual top-hand stories and articles of fact and fiction to make up a magazine to ride the river with. Look forward to our next issue!

MAIL CALL

MASKED RIDER WESTERN gets all the way round the world. We are likely any day to find in our mail a letter written by someone lying on his cot in a tent on the North African desert listening to the padding of camel's feet going by outside, from an isolated sheep ranch in the middle of Australia, from the little white-churched settlement on the steep coral beach at Waianse in the Sandwich Islands, or al-

most any place you could name without thinking too hard. Wherever these letters come from it is always a satisfying experience to know that there is something in the stories that appeals to the deep human core of people of all kinds, everywhere.

This issue we have a letter from Germany that we think will surprise and interest you as much as it did us.

An old Indian friend of mine sends me your MASKED RIDER WESTERN each time it comes out, and I think it is the best of the Western Magazines. You see, MASKED RIDER is also traveling English speaking Germany. Having read the magazines I give them to my friends, and everywhere they're much appreciated.

Very interesting I also find the Trail Talk for I'm an old Western fan. My father was a cowboy, himself, and traveled the far Texas plains in 1890. I am now a member of the Munich Cowboy's Club, founded in 1913.

I am thirty-two years of age and should like very much to correspond with girls and boys about my age who are readers of MASKED RIDER WESTERN themselves and who love the glorious West as I do, in order to exchange thoughts, to discuss the MASKED RIDER stories and the Old West in general.——*Kurt Klotzbach (21B) Dortmund-Luetgendortmund, In der Schmechting 5, Germany-Westphalia, British Zone.*

Some readers are still worrying about Wayne Morgan getting married. We have not heard that he has any such plans, and we will certainly get in touch with our readers in such an event. We feel quite confident that Morgan would not get married without letting us know. Of course he would be per-

[*Turn page*]

Walt Slade, the "Hawk" of the Range, Stars in one of the year's Most Exciting Yarns! Read—

WHEAT WAR

By BRADFORD SCOTT

in the May

THRILLING WESTERN

NOW ON SALE—25c AT ALL STANDS!

MEN! WOMEN!

New Car given as Bonus!

TAKE ORDERS for *Nationally Advertised*

NYLONS

GUARANTEED NINE MONTHS

Sensational Guarantee creating a tremendous demand for Wilknit Nylons! If they run, wear out or even snag from any cause whatever... within NINE MONTHS... depending on quantity... they are replaced FREE OF CHARGE. No wonder it's easy to quickly build up fine, steady, year-'round income. Earnings start immediately. Look at these exceptional figures—Ralph Shearer made $67.11, **first week**—Mrs. Paul Estes, $42.92—Mrs. Ivey Gentry, $43.37. Doris Jensen in addition to making as much as $17.00 in a single day, earned two cars as EXTRA BONUSES. Learn how you can make money in your full or spare time without a bit of previous experience.

EARNED TWO NEW CARS ... and as much as $120.00 in one week

That's the exceptionally fine record of Chas. Milla with the famous Wilknit hosiery line. Offer of New Chevrolet as a bonus open to EVERYONE. Send name for facts FREE.

SEND NO MONEY... *Just Hose Size*

When you send for Selling Outfit, I also send your choice of Nylons or Socks for your personal use. Don't lose a minute. Rush name on penny postcard for full money-making facts on Sensational Sales Kit. Send hose size, too. **Lowell Wilkin, WILKNIT HOSIERY CO., 76, Midway, Greenfield, Ohio**

AMAZING OFFER—$40 IS YOURS FOR SELLING ONLY 50 BOXES

Also entirely different, new Deluxe All-Occasion assortment with feature television card. Little Pearls, Hankie Gift Greetings, other surprise items. Samples on approval. Write today. It costs nothing to try.

FREE SAMPLES IMPRINTED STATIONERY & ROSE SCENTED NOTES

CHEERFUL CARD CO., Dept. AM-9, White Plains, N.Y.

INVENTORS

Learn how to protect your invention. Secure "Patent Guide" together with "Record of Invention" form—without obligation.

CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON

Registered Patent Attorneys

08-D District National Bldg. Washington 5, D. C.

"YOU ARE UNDER ARREST!"

Help Bring Crooks to Justice Through Scientific

CRIME DETECTION!

We have taught thousands this exciting, profitable, pleasant profession. Let us teach you **in your own home.** Learn Finger Printing, Firearms Indentification, Police Photography, Secret Service Methods thoroughly, quickly, at small cost. Over 800 of all American Bureaus of Identification employ I. A. S. students or graduates. We can prepare you for this fascinating work, during spare time. Write today, stating age, for "Blue Book of Crime."

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE, 1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 796-A Chicago 40, Ill.

"I Want You"

Work for "Uncle Sam"

Start as high as $3,450.00 a year

MEN-WOMEN. Prepare NOW at home for Examinations. Veterans get special preference. Write immediately for 40-page Civil Service book, with list of positions and full particulars telling how to qualify.

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE

(Not Government Controlled)

Dept. D-94 Rochester 4, N. Y.

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 50. Many Swedish Massage graduates make big money! Large full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. Prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma. Anatomy charts and 32-page Illustrated Book FREE!

The College of Swedish Massage

Dept. 063G, 41 E. Pearson, Chicago 11

Be a DETECTIVE

A CHALLENGE FROM WASHINGTON D.C.!

Help Stop Crime! Train at home. Earn big money. Amazing training course from the NATIONS CAPITOL (center of law enforcement) by former U.S. GOVT. AGENT and NAVAL INTELLIGENCE Officer exposes actual methods used by Criminals. Write for FREE BOOK. State age.

INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE SYSTEM

INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE TRAINING SCHOOL

1701 Monroe St., N.E. Dept. 196 Washington 18, D.C.

AGENTS WANTED **GET INTO ADVERTISING**

MAKE A QUICK KILLING!

Everything you need to CLEAN up this year! Amazing new catalog and Free sales kit brings you THOUSANDS of Advertising specialties, pricing tickets, electric signs, display devices. Send postcard for it today. Remember it's FREE! Write:

FREE SALES KIT

PRICING PRESS, Dept. TF

103 Lafayette St. N. Y. 13, N. Y.

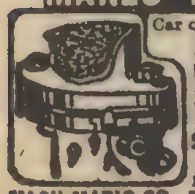
RUPTURE!

An amazing Air-Cushion Invention allows body freedom at work or play. Light, neat, cool, sanitary. Durable, cheap. Day and night protection helps Nature support weakened muscles gently but surely. No risk. **Sent on Trial!** Write NOW for free Booklet and **Proof of Results.** All correspondence confidential.

Brooks Company, 183-D State St., Marshall, Mich.

CARBURETOR TOO RICH

MAKES MOTORIST TOO POOR



Car owners who are wasting money and not getting proper gas mileage due to over-rich mixtures will be pleased to learn how to save gasoline by VACU-MATING over-rich mixtures. VACU-MATIC fits all cars, trucks and tractors. It is *automatic* and operates on the supercharge principle. Easily installed in a few minutes.

SALESMEN WANTED! Big Profits! Send name, address on penny postcard for *free particulars* and how to get yours for introducing.

VACU-MATIC CO., 7617-1662 W. State St., WAUWATOSA, WIS.

A Gala Roundup of the Best in Western Fiction!

FIVE WESTERN NOVELS

NOW ON SALE—ONLY 25c EVERYWHERE!

fectly within his rights to do so, but knowing him as well as we do, we do not feel that he is the kind of character who would not let us in on such an important event after we have published so many stories about him that he is practically a member of the family. The latest letter on this subject is from Oklahoma, a state in which Morgan has performed some of his most noteworthy exploits.

I read your MASKED RIDER WESTERN each time it comes out, and I think it's a great magazine. I don't think Wayne Morgan should get married. I believe a few others as well as myself would like to read about the origin of the Masked Rider.

GUNS ACROSS THE CHEROKEE STRIP was a very good story. Keep up the good work. I like all your stories.——*Albert Harris, 1622 Linden St., Oklahoma City.*

About the origin of the MASKED RIDER, we are not sure that anyone knew, but perhaps sometime in our research we can dig it up. Morgan isn't a man who likes to talk about himself, and is very reticent about his early history.

Here's part of a letter from an old hand both at living and at reading, and we always consider it a compliment when a man who has done a lot of living likes to read the kind of stories we put out.

I have been reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN for a long time. It sure is a fine Western Magazine. It keeps me from being lonely. I sit up till eleven or later at night reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN or the THE RIO KID WESTERN or TEXAS RANGERS.

I get four or six of the Western magazines at a time. I have still got them put away. I am an old bachelor by myself, and you don't know how I like to read those good old stories. I will just keep on reading them as long as I live. So I thank you with all my heart for the true Old Western MASKED RIDER stories.——*John Crowell, Rt. 1, Ponder, Texas.*

Thanks for those good words, Mr. John Crowell. Hope we will go on deserving such high praise from a veteran reader.

No sooner do we schedule BLACK SHADOW TRAIL by T. K. Ford for the next issue, than we receive a letter from a reader specifically recommending the work of this writer. That's the kind of coincidence we like to have happen!

I like the MASKED RIDER book very much, and I like the WAYNE MORGAN stories by T.

W. Ford better than the rest. There is a fast-moving, rapid-fire quality about them that never lets the action down, and keeps Morgan embroiled in trouble up to both elbows and his ears. There's an hombre I sure would like to meet. Keep 'em ridin'——*James Hall, Fremont, N. C., Route 2, Box 28.*

What do you know folks and folksesses, not a carping word of criticism this time! But whether it's knocks or boosts, please write in! Every letter is carefully read and considered, and believe us, your wishes determine the policy of the magazine. This is a democratic outfit, and the will of the majority goes. So don't be bashful. Let's have your opinions, gripes, likes and anecdotes. We like to hear particularly from old-timers about their experiences as cowpunchers, prospectors, oil field huskies or what not. Yours till beef grows on trees!

Kindly address all your letters and postcards to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. Thanks, everybody!

—THE EDITOR.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

Follow the Far-Famed Masked Rider and His Yaqui Pard Blue Hawk on One of Their Most Exciting Adventures in—

BLACK SHADOW TRAIL

A Complete Action Novel

By T. W. FORD

Packed With Stirring Surprises!

ACCOUNTANT

BECOME AN EXPERT

. . BOOKKEEPER . . C.P.A.

The demand for skilled accountants—*men and women who really know their business*—is increasing. National and state legislation is requiring of business much more in the way of Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Organization, Management, Finance. Men who prove their qualifications in this important field are promoted to responsible executive positions.

Knowledge of bookkeeping unnecessary. We train you from ground up, or according to your individual needs. Low cost; easy terms.

Send for *free* 48-page book describing the LaSalle accountancy training and the opportunities in this highly profitable field—plus "Ten Years' Promotion in One," a book which has helped many men.

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION

——————417 S. Dearborn Street——————
Dept. 6329-HR Chicago 5, Ill.

Please send me "Accountancy, the Profession that Pays"—plus "Ten Years' Promotion in One"—without obligation.

☐ Higher Accountancy
☐ C.P.A. Coaching
☐ Bookkeeping
☐ Law: LL.B. Degree
☐ Business Management
☐ Salesmanship
☐ Traffic Management
☐ Foremanship ☐ Stenotypy
☐ Industrial Management (Machine Shorthand)

Name.....*Age*.....
Address.....
City, Zone, State.....

High School Course at Home
Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. HA58 Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

Free for Asthma

If you suffer with attacks of Asthma and choke and gasp for breath, if restful sleep is difficult because of the struggle to breathe, don't fail to send at once to the Frontier Asthma Company for a FREE trial of the FRONTIER ASTHMA MEDICINE, a preparation for temporary symptomatic relief of paroxysms of Bronchial Asthma. No matter where you live or whether you have faith in any medicine under the sun, send today for this free trial. It will cost you nothing.

FRONTIER ASTHMA CO. 582-D FRONTIER BLDG.
462 NIAGARA ST. BUFFALO 1, N. Y.

LEARN AT HOME
TO BE A PRACTICAL NURSE

You can learn practical nursing at home in spare time. Course endorsed by physicians. Thousands of graduates.

HIGH SCHOOL NOT REQUIRED

51st year. One graduate has charge of 10-bed hospital. Another saved $400 while learning. Equipment included. Men, women, 18 to 60. Easy tuition payments. Trial plan.

CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dept. 426, 41 East Pearson Street, Chicago 11, Ill.
Please send free booklet, and 16 sample lesson pages.

Name.....
City.....*State*.....*Age*.....

WOMEN ARE HERE TO STAY!

...OR...

HOW TO STAY HOME WITH A GOOD BOOK--AND LIKE IT!

THE SEX MACHINE
by Shepherd Mead

Mac depends on the Sex Machine when he starts his search for America's sexiest girl! Don't miss the zany pay-off when a buxom lass stands in the way of his fame!

PIKES PEEK OR BUST
by Earl Wilson

Charley sells G-strings to damsels in "un-dress"...and from here you see Broadway backstage. Get the inside dope about Milton Berle, Fred Allen and others!

MACAMBA
by Lilla Van Saher

She tore off her clothes, walked into his arms. But this was just an interlude for Paul, the half-caste in a land of lust and hate, where only Macambas (white men) counted!

GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES
by Anita Loos

Gus wanted to improve her "mind", but chorus-cutie Lorelei preferred to make her sex appeal pay off! Read this daffy dame's diary! It's now a Broadway hit! Find out why!

Newsstands are selling out fast! Insure yourself against missing this exciting reading! Order *your* handsomely-bound Popular Library Books by mail *now!* Use the coupon...but hurry...before it's too late!

POPULAR LIBRARY, INC., Dept. TFG-6
10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Send me postpaid the POPULAR LIBRARY BOOKS I have checked. I enclose 25¢ (in coin or in U. S. stamps of small denomination) per copy. (NOTE: We pay postage for orders of four books or more. If ordering *less* than four books, please enclose 5¢ per book extra for postage.)

- ☐ THE SEX MACHINE by Shepherd Mead
- ☐ GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES by Anita Loos
- ☐ MACAMBA by Lilla Van Saher
- ☐ PIKES PEEK OR BUST by Earl Wilson
- ☐ FOCUS by Arthur Miller (Not Shown) author of the prize play, "Death of a Salesman".
- ☐ DUKE by Hal Ellson (Not Shown) a novel of teen-age gangsters that will both shock and awaken you.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY & ZONE.....STATE.....

Be Protected in case of SICKNESS or ACCIDENT

HERE'S AN AMAZING NEW HOSPITALIZATION PLAN

NO TIME LIMIT
ON HOSPITAL ROOM AND BOARD
Policy Pays as Long as You Stay!

MAIL COUPON BELOW

You Get Doctor Benefits in case of Accident, Payment for Certain Operations . . . Even Polio Coverage.

COSTS ONLY 3c A DAY

Individual or Family Eligible . . . Birth to Age 70

This is it! America's newest and greatest Hospitalization Plan. Amazing coverage. Lower cost. Exactly what you need!

If you get sick or have an accident, you may go to any recognized Hospital (Rest Homes, Sanitariums excluded). Your NORTH AMERICAN Policy will pay for Room and Board at the rate of **$150.00** PER MONTH. Stay as long as necessary. There's NO TIME LIMIT. For loss of time while Hospitalized, due to accident, every insured, from age 18, no matter if employed, unemployed or a housewife, receives **$25.00** PER WEEK in addition to regular Hospital Benefits.

For Accidental Death POLICY PAYS **$1,000.00** . . . triple amount — **$3,000.00** — for death resulting from accident while travelling on a common carrier. Policy also pays lump cash payments for Certain Surgical Operations when caused by Diseases, Sickness or Accident.

Another important coverage—for Doctor Bills, in case of accident, POLICY PAYS **$25.00** PER WEEK while confined to Hospital. But this isn't all. Unlike most Hospitalization Plans you and insured family members also get Polio coverage—**$500.00** to cover Hospital Bills, **$500.00** for Medical Treatment, **$500.00** for Orthopedic Appliances.

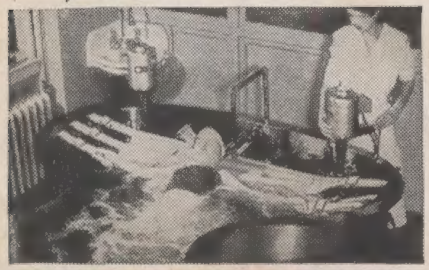
Then, too, there are Benefits for accidental Loss of Hands, Feet or Eyes; Emergency Hospital Treatment for accidents involving no confinement, etc. Imagine all this wonderful value and coverage at a rate for adults of only about 3c a day, 1½c a day for children to age 18 . . . and CHILDREN GET FULL BENEFITS. (Maternity Rider is available at small additional charge.)

IMPORTANT — The NORTH AMERICAN POLICY pays you FULL BENEFITS regardless of money you collect from other insurance sources for the same disability, including Workmen's Compensation. We pay direct to you! This means, if you are already carrying Hospitalization—be smart . . . buy this additional Policy, with its extra cash benefits, to protect yourself against today's higher Hospital costs. Don't delay! MAIL COUPON BELOW for FREE DETAILS.

ACCIDENT BENEFITS

SPECIFIC SURGICAL BENEFITS

LOSS OF TIME DUE TO ACCIDENT



INFANTILE PARALYSIS BENEFITS

FREE! MAIL THIS COUPON

Truly this is a remarkable Hospitalization Plan. Investigate it! Buy it! Mail coupon for complete details.

No obligation. No agent will call.

North American Mutual **INSURANCE COMPANY**

Dept. TG6-50, North American Building, Wilmington 99, Delaware

Please send me without obligation full details about the new North American Hospitalization Plan. No Agent will call.

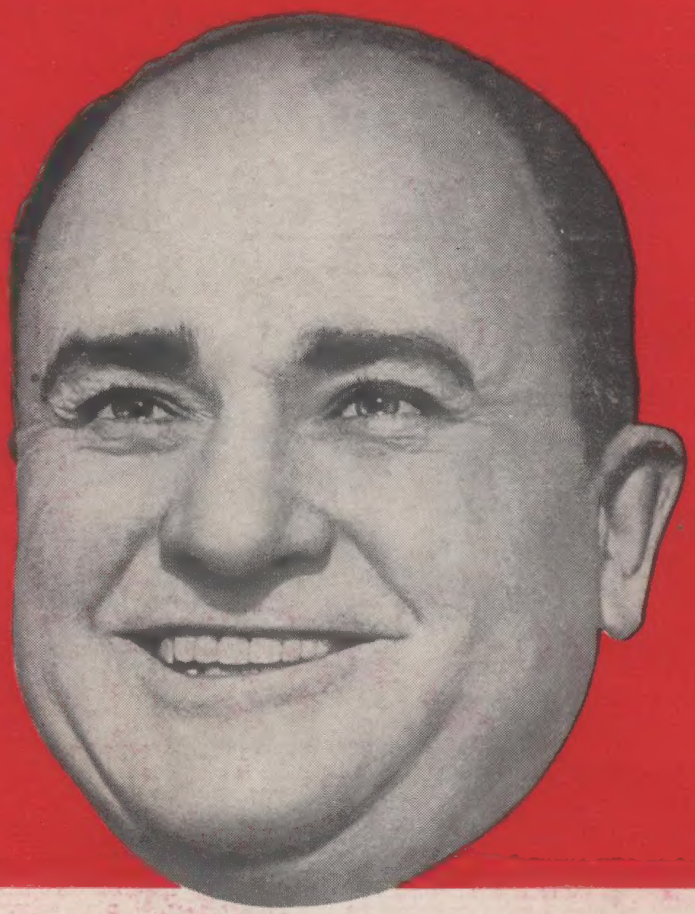
Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State.....

(Paste on penny postcard or mail in envelope)

ACCORDING TO HOYLE—



GEORGE HOYLE, Chicago tire merchant, says "Calvert is tops in my book for smoother, milder, mellower taste!"

It's Smart to Switch to

Calvert Reserve

Lighter... Smoother... Tastes Better

BLENDED WHISKEY, 86.8 PROOF, 65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS.
CALVERT DISTILLERS CORPORATION, NEW YORK CITY